IT'S THE POLITICAL ECONOMY, STUPID

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AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM

by david markus

NEW YORK This exhibition, curated by artists Oliver Ressler and Gregory Sholette, predominantly comprises video-based political works from an international roster of artists. Taking its title from an essay by cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, who adapted the phrase from a 1992 Bill Clinton campaign slogan, the show is a timely reminder of the perils of unchecked free-market ideology.

Among the exhibition’s unexpected highlights is its recurring emphasis on dance. Austrian Isa Rosenberger’s video Espiral—A Dance of Death in 8 Scenes (2010–11) is an homage to The Green Table (1932), a ballet that German dancer and choreographer Kurt Jooss conceived amid the economic crisis of the 1930s. The video intercuts various elements, including narration about the troubled past 100 years of Austrian finance and performances of the late choreographer’s danse macabre. The suggestion seems clear: the history of capitalism is a dance with death, hell-bent on repeating its catastrophes.

Near the opposing wall, Labor and Capital (2004), a small, translucent sculpture by Austrian Linda Bilda, serves as a succinct addendum to Rosenberger’s video. Depicting two tangoing figures, the work translates what the wall text calls the “ritualized subjugation” of the Argentinean dance form into Marxist terms: the subjugating male is Capital, the subjugated female Labor.

Dance also takes center stage in Body Versus Capital (2011), a video by the Seville-based group flo6x8, documenting a series of flash mob-style flamenco dance and music performances undertaken inside banks around Spain. While the group’s anticapitalist message appears lost on the bankers, the artists manage to turn society’s deaf ears into a further point of criticism. A segment in which a young man sings a mournful melody to the security camera in an otherwise empty cash machine vestibule comes across as a surprisingly poignant allegory about the inhumanity of finance.

An equally compelling representation of that inhumanity appears in German Jan Peter Hammer’s The Anarchist Banker (2010), which depicts the guest of a fictional television journalism program holding so unyieldingly to what his host accurately dubs “financial sophistry” that he may as well be a machine. Like the 1922 Fernando Pessoa short story it’s based on, Hammer’s work is an ingenious exposé of the self-interest that underpins the capitalist attitude. The work makes for a suitable companion piece to Yevgeniy Fiks, Olga Kopenkina and Alexandra Lerman’s video, Reading Lenin with Corporations (2011–12), in which members of the corporate sector participate in a discussion about Lenin’s writings. A more humanizing depiction of capital, the piece nevertheless conveys the ideological obstacles facing alternative modes of political thought.

The issues raised by the exhibition are pithily encapsulated in a video installed in the building’s glass entryway. In Money to
Burn (2010), artist Dread Scott strides through Wall Street with money pinned to his shirt. He removes bills and sets fire to them one by one, asking passersby to join him. Visible from the sidewalk on a block that the Austrian Cultural Forum shares with Cartier, Ferragamo and Tourneau, the work affirms a disheartening truth about the cultural mindset this well-curated exhibition aims to critique: many would prefer to see their money burn than have it distributed equitably.

Photo: flo6x8: Body Versus Capital, 2011, video, 40 minutes; in "It's the Political Economy, Stupid" at the Austrian Cultural Forum.

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