

Quasi-Marxism, Sustainability Fairy Tales and ÜBER Fashion: Camilla Palestra in Conversation with Rainer Ganahl



COMME des MARXISTS,
installation view at White
Columns, New York, 2013

“If anything is certain – I, myself, am not a Marxist!” was your opening statement at your first COMME des MARXISTS fashion show at New York’s White Columns during Performa 2013. Is *Comme de Marxist*, a quasi-Marxist, a definition that better fits your work?

Correct, I am for sure not a Marxist in the common sense of the word. But Karl Marx himself stated not to be a Marxist. In a more academic sense, I am a Marxist, as I embrace historical materialism as a way of thinking: I follow the money, I follow conflicts.

Camilla Palestra

Rainer Ganahl

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Since the 2008 global financial crisis and the failure of the bank system, the rise of a new class consciousness through movements across the globe (We are the 99%, Los Indignados, Occupy, amongst others) for many represented a glimmer of hope for an alternative. We were believing that social media, including Facebook, Twitter and other platforms, could be hijacked to organise activist unrest. Instead, we have been hijacked. Let’s just think of the recent revelation of the major data breach, the systematic unlawful use of our personal data by companies such as Cambridge Analytica with the collusion of Facebook and other social media platforms. I see COMME des MARXISTS encompassing many of the slogans, statements and discourses arising from the global crisis: quite literally, if we think of *Marx 99 Cents*, *Marx Middle Class Squeeze*, *snowdenmarx.gov* and *Snowden Marx Security*, for examples. Ten years after, how are your projects evolving and responding?

RG

I am up and busy. Today, the Trump administration just delivered another significant contribution to my *Trumpism* series, *TRUTH ISN’T TRUTH*. This Trump truism and outright lying people are not only dominating Washington but also many parts of my personal life. Trump, therefore, might be the most honest of all presidents in recent history when it comes to expressing his radical political will, as he openly is racist, openly is obstructionist, openly Eurocentric and White Supremacist. He has “alternative truth” and plays victim of “fake news media”, while speaking for and assuming the attitudes of the disgruntled, angry, white working-class voters threatened by an opioid and suicide epidemic. They lost their jobs precisely because of people Trump lets now create havoc also in his administration. They all are from Wall Street and other corporate shark waters, which destroyed the industries of the very people the president wants to rescue and speak for now.

To short-circuit your answer, all I try to do is to stay sane and focused, and not forget that 1 and 1 is

not more or less but 2. I have to confess, hearing and reading about Trump and his macabre, shameless, burlesque, theatrical, obscene, successful acting is enlightening and serves as a reality check for the personal and professional monstrosities I am encountering frequently.

A text that you often brought to my attention while discussing the project for the Fashion Space Gallery in London is Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. How do you see a text from 1845 still relevant today?

That is a very good question I tried to answer with my work done in Manchester with the same title, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. My premise was and still is that the under- or unemployed working class is penny-pinching on eBay and other online marketplaces where people try to survive economically, psychologically and socially. Engels got inside the Irish slums in Manchester only thanks to the help of the Irish textile worker Mary Burns, who was also his lover. She facilitated access for his first-hand descriptions. Engels dedicated many pages to the dressing, eating, living and sleeping conditions of the working class.

He called the trash-composed worn-out lumpen of the Irish underclass *Devil's Dust*, which inspired me to propose to Fashion Space Gallery a new series, *Angels' Dust*, whose production, unfortunately, ended up being too complex for the exhibition in London. *Angels' Dust* is conceived as a fashion trash recycling programme, which is making me now contact famous designers for their textile snippets and leftovers at the end of the day in their actual design studios. The various heaps of discardable leftovers are supposed to be indiscriminately thrown together and reassembled in tedious work to a new surface to be cut into simple shapes to become one of my *Sustainability Fairy Tales*.

To go back to your question, yes, Engels' book is relevant. The city of Manchester was for sure not

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pleased with his depiction of misery. Engels, and in particular Marx, should therefore be seen as survivors of censorship, something that many intellectuals and artists today do not understand. I mention this because I have experienced censorship and even physical assault myself while presenting one part of the somehow on-going COMME des MAR*ISTS series *Marx a Prato/Gucci a Prato* in Italy last summer.

CP

“Two centuries on, Karl Marx feels more revolutionary than ever.”¹ Do you agree?

RG

It depends who you ask. But I can present proof of strong reactions to Marx, given the resistance and reactionary revolt I just got when I brought Marx in my carry-on luggage to Prato. The Karl Marx as a brand, for me, tries to benefit the people, the demos as in democracy versus the demos as standard promotional material in the entertainment industry, to benefit the interests of the stars.

Power and propaganda are revolving doors, and revolutions keep them turning. Currently, we witness a right-wing swinging and spinning that will not have much patience with Marx, journalism and art that touches our lives. When I purchased ten copies of the German edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published across ten subsequent decades as an artwork, I could reflect upon the various degrees of resistance against the texts of Marx, as well as forced or tolerant acceptance of the same. There were decades and places in which you could find your death or lose your citizenship or residency papers by having this book at home, and decades and places in which you were in trouble not having such a text in your home. Hence, Marx and Engels' writings can serve as barometers of political climate change.

1. Stuart Jeffries, “Two centuries on, Karl Marx feels more revolutionary than ever”, in *The Guardian*, 5 May 2018, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/05/karl-marx-200th-birthday-communist-manifesto-revolutionary

Going back to COMME des MAR*ISTS, for the first time, the project is presented within a fashion institution, for a predominantly fashion audience. How does this different context alter the shift between entertainment and antagonism?

CP

I can't answer this question, but I very much look forward to learning more about it. But my guess is that, independently of how people are trained or conditioned to look at and read things according to their habits and context, they still can distinguish between the subtle and not-so-subtle semiotic games I offer. Also, we shouldn't ignore the quite common uniformity and limitations within the art world.

RG

Anywhere, professionals in the arts feel challenged by these artistic propositions under the pretence of fashion. The majority of people couldn't and can't see or accept my silhouettes and text-filled surfaces as art. The fashion works are perceived as props for performances and may be valued only as awkward, impractical, yet funny fashion items to wear for certain occasions, be it just Halloween. I have to say, it is brave of you and your institution to give my work a chance to be shown in a setting dedicated to fashion, when it is so obvious that I have no idea about fashion, beyond any careless consumer who occasionally overspends with the help of credit cards on sales.

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Quoting from you: "The future of fashion is gonna be like the present and past of fashion. There will be clothing for the rich, there will be clothing for the poor [...] I'd love to come up with a fashion line that anticipates flooded cities, in which the lower parts of our outfits need to protect us from poisoned waters and the upper parts need to protect from lethal boiling radiation." Is this your prediction for the future – and not only of fashion?

CP

Yes, correct. This is and stays my prediction of the future, but we will still also have lots of fun, even if we

RG

don't belong to the class of the crazy rich. As long as people need to be made, formed, educated, civilised, as well as deformed, deconstructed, dehumanised and worse, there will be a need for clothing, hence fashion. We also have the fairytale of the child describing the king's attire, and going naked, which is my most preferred outfit at home alone and, in all likelihood, the cheapest and the healthiest in our ever-warming climate.

But, yes, technology will carry fashion forward, and eventually we will develop fabrics that don't get dirty, don't get folds, don't get tired, and last forever. They also will adapt to outside temperatures and react to pulse and other body clues for adjustments like warming and cooling, and also, for extra support, allow stiffening and opening for airy relaxation. We will fabricate these new fabrics out of thin, clean air, brains and love, and will see them inflate and deflate, enlarge, and miniaturise when not needed anymore. The special texture of future garments can change its consistency and turn from leather or hard rubber to cashmere or silk through simple audio commands. It also will lighten up or thicken depending on whether you flip your dog at a yoga studio, or engage in a downhill race on skis or on a mountain bike and need extra strength.

These ÜBER garments are intelligent interfaces, bullet- and accident-proof, transforming into wings when in a burning skyscraper – think 9/11 and that tragic Grenfell Tower fire, killing British and non-British working class, which could have been prevented with proper fire prevention – or saving you from drowning. Should your airbag malfunction in a car accident, our future ÜBER wardrobe would not. Thus, fashion will take care of us.

Disclosure: ÜBER Fabrics is part of my growing number of *Sustainability Fairy Tales* still awaiting venture capital.