



FEATURE

International Workers' Day: Art and Labour

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by Sandy Di Yu

Art often gets categorized as an autonomous sphere of existence outside of capital, but art, like all culture, is a product of its environment. Yet art has the tendency to be critical of its environment, exposing the absurdity and violence that the system in authority espouses.

May 1st was chosen as the day for International Workers' Day, in commemoration of the Haymarket Affair on May 4th, 1886. What started off as a peaceful rally in Chicago, Illinois in support of a workers' strike and in response to the death of workers at the hands of police ended in a bloodbath as a bomb was chuck into the crowd. The blast and ensuing gunfire killed eleven and injured countless others.

Although this event was the result of years of destitution and dire working conditions following the Long Depression, centuries later we see the celebration of May Day not merely for demonstrations held by labour unions and socialist groups but also for people of all political leanings to be out in the sun (or whatever weather conditions abound) and get boisterously inebriated.

While we love the alcohol-infused apolitical parts of May Day celebrations as much as the next person, the premise of labour and socialist thought is something that shouldn't be overlooked. Art often gets categorized as an autonomous sphere of existence outside of capital, but art, like all culture, is a product of its environment. Yet art has the tendency to be critical of its environment, exposing the absurdity and violence that the system in authority espouses. For this, there are countless works that question and criticize the underlying power structures that May Day reminds us to take a stand against. So whenever you decide to take a break from the labour of expanding your liver, we've listed a few artists that could very well make you want to trade in your liquor bottle for a protest sign and picket line.

Russian Constructivism



Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition (blue rectangle over the red beam)*, 1916.

Starting from the corner of the world that sees socialism as deeply embedded in its recent history, the Constructivists was a highly influential group of artists and theorists from Russia, premised on a rejection of autonomous art. Their movement would influence culture throughout the world, including Bauhaus and De Stijl movements that were themselves renowned. Constructivist artists actively participated in public life during the civil war in Russia between the “red” socialist movement and the “white” counter-revolutionaries, vying for the side of revolution. Notable participants include founder Vladimir Tatlin, artist Kazimir Malevich, and artist Alexander Rodchenko, all of whom contributed to the movement’s success and memorable aesthetics.

Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*



Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830

One of the most iconic images that symbolizes revolution, Romantic French painter Delacroix's masterpiece that now hangs in the [Louvre](#) is a commemoration of the French Revolution of 1830, also known as the July Revolution. This revolution overthrew King Charles X, where the regard of his new governance quickly went from acclaim to disdain as he implemented new laws that would see to religious inequality and lack of compensation for the loss of property due to that French Revolution in the previous century. Liberty is personified as a woman, or the goddess of liberty, brandishing the French tricolour flag in one hand and holding a musket in the other. She leads revolutionaries victoriously over fallen bodies and barricades, reminding us of France's long history of leftist revolutionary political movements. Even today it sees to yet another wave of protests as neoliberal policies of education reform are being proposed by the Macron government which threatens to loosen the public sector.

George Tooker, Government Bureau



George Tooker, *Government Bureau*, 1956. Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and DC Moore Gallery, NY

Often cited as a Kafka-esque commentary on governmental inefficiency, George Tooker's Government Bureau is a perfect depiction of the human condition under capitalism and its birthing of modern despair. Painted with egg tempera, the surreal image shows a strong use of repetition to emphasize monotony, while faceless government workers stare out from behind cubicle windows to keep their watchful eye on both the viewer and the other sombre characters in the painting. Alienation in modernity sees its connection with the depersonalized hierarchical power structures that workers are subjected to. This power structure underlies the friendship between capital and bureaucracy, and sets the stage for the difficulty in changing policy from the bottom up.

Edward Burtynsky



Edward Burtynsky, *Manufacturing #17*, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province, China, 2005, Chromogenic Colour Print

Canadian photographer [Edward Burtynsky](#) captures large-scale portrayals of changing landscapes and factory scenes that show the impact of industrialization. Beyond the predicament of labour, these photos show the struggle between two desires: that of wanting the good life, and that of knowing the harm that capital and industry does to the world around us, both ecologically and existentially.

Guerilla Girls



Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989

Emancipation of workers goes hand in hand with equality between races and sexes. The bloody history of capitalism sees the subjugation of women and minorities since the initial dismantling of feudalism, and while the sheer violence that this history saw in the persecution of female bodies has died down, there is no doubt that we continue to fight for equality in many spheres of society. The [Guerilla Girls](#) knew this well, and in donning their gorilla masks and taking a stand, changed the conversation for the better. While their work is nowhere near complete, and while their posters have been subsumed within the larger institutional powers of the art world, their efforts in bringing attention to the clear failures of the cultural sector continues to be heard loud and clear, and continues to be relevant in the wake of current political upheavals.

Diego Rivera

Diego Rivera, *Liberation of the Peon*, 1931

A vivid storyteller through his monumental murals, Diego Rivera depicts narratives of socialists being subjugated and harmed at the hand of colonizers and other men in power. The Russian revolution reverberated throughout the world and resonated with the people of Mexico, and Rivera, a prominent member of the Mexican Communist Party, first met then-curator of MoMA Alfred H. Barr in Moscow at a celebration of the 10 year anniversary of the revolution. While decades of American propaganda quelled the socialist interests of labourers and instilled the Red Scare into the American people, Rivera's work remains ever popular in the US and international crowds, and brought to international attention the hardship and racial dynamics that seized the lives of Mexicans due to colonial powers with capitalist interests.

Ngozi Onwurah - The Body Beautiful



Ngozi Onwurah, *The Body Beautiful*, 1990

In exploring labour, we must not forget that domestic work is still labour, and that reproductive labour remains equally as valuable as the productive. Motherhood is often overlooked in the logic of capital where growth and profit are foundational, but without this reproductive power, capital would cease to exist. One such artist who does a beautiful exploration of mother-child relations is British-Nigerian artist and director Ngozi Onwurah. Her short film *The Beautiful Body* explores the intricate relation between mother and daughter, the difficulties of a racial Britain, and the complex dynamics of sexuality.

Wayne McGregor



In the age of information and algorithms, the conversations around capital and labour are heading in new directions. Talks of decentralization abound, as do discussions about automation as a means of emancipation. In an installation and performance that explores human relations to these new advances in technology, British choreographer Wayne McGregor produced this stunning work alongside Random International and Warp Records. [+/- Human](#) showcased mysterious flying spheres that interacted with dancers and poses questions of post-humanity and technologically influenced bodily movement. You can read more about the performance [here](#).

Zach Blas



Zach Blas, *Jubilee 2033*, film still, 2018

Often evoking ideas of surveillance and futurity, contemporary artist Zach Blas' works explore technology through the perspective of queer and feminist theory. One of his latest exhibitions titled Contra-Internet features a film titled Jubilee 2033, where Ayn Rand and members of her collective Alan Greenspan and Joan Mitchell take an acid trip to a far-off dystopian future. An ingenious depiction of capital's hold on network theory and a humorous commentary on the inexplicably popular theories of objectivism in right-wing political spheres, the work was commissioned by Gasworks in London.

Turner: Rain, Steam, Speed



J. M. W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, Speed*, 1844

And to finish off our list, we had to include something that involved an [art bunny](#). Turner's Rain, Steam, Speed is another interpretation of unrelenting industrialization, with a steam engine trucking forward on a bridge through a stormy haze. Notably, there is a rabbit in the foreground that is running away from (or running in front of) the train, and could be interpreted either as nature's ability to overcome industry and technology, or a warning that humanity should be wary of technological advance.

About the writer:

[Sandy Di Yu](#), London-based writer, art theorist and artist. Follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), or visit her [website](#).

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