

Corporal Economics

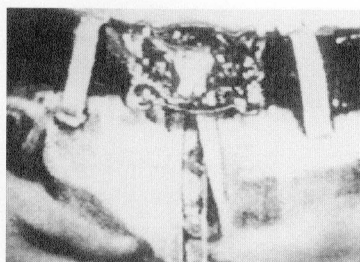
Curated by Andrew J. Paterson



Laura Kipnis

Marx: The Video

—*A Politics of Revolting Bodies*



John Di Stefano

Tell Me Why:

The Epistemology of Disco



Gary Kibbins

A Short History of Water

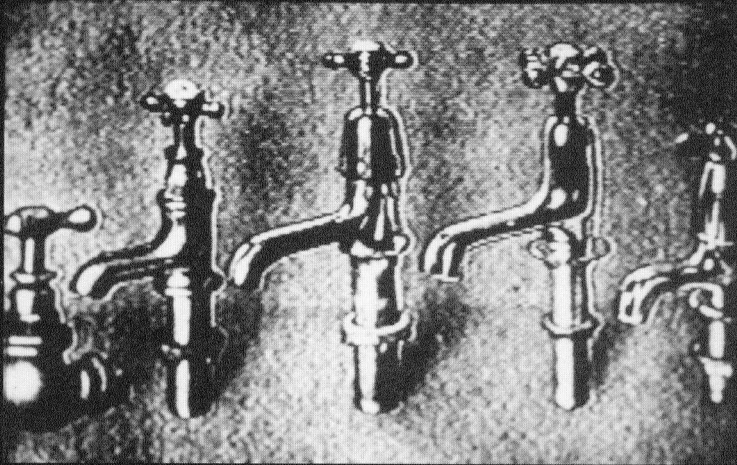
The three tapes in this exhibition are united by their concerns with those excessive fluids which have historically proven uncontainable within schematic or utopian economic systems. While Marxism, because of oversights and structural flaws, was unable to regulate activities related to bodily desires, markets and corporate capitalisms cannot help creating hierarchies of access and reward despite their surface sense of freedom and apparent lack of regulatory presence.

The utopian/utilitarian economic dream of Marxism is now almost completely invisible among existing nation-state governments. Many idealists claim that Marxist revolutions — with their ultimate goal of completely classless societies — were never seriously attempted. Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Castro were in fact the tyrannical enforcers of counter-revolutions that replaced management/property classes with a state-sanctioned bureaucratic class. Laura Kipnis's tape, *Marx: The Video — A Politics of Revolting Bodies*, revisits and revises Marxism after the 1989 collapse of the Soviet bloc, after psychoanalysis, and particularly after feminism.

Kipnis' subtitle points to a conundrum which has long haunted utilitarian philosophies: Can bodies be revolutionary when revolutionary minds consider bodies to be revolting? As Marx declared in a letter to his collaborator Engels, his own body was erupting into carbuncles while he was writing his masterpiece *Das Kapital*. Kipnis seizes upon Marx's own dysfunctional body in order to highlight Marxism's corpophobia.

"Marxism privileges the characteristically masculine activity of production as the *definitively human* activity (Marx: men 'begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence'); women, historically consigned to the spheres of nonproductive or reproductive labour, are thereby situated outside the society of male producers, in a state of nature."¹ *Marx: The Video* presents biographical evidence — the story of Marx's illegitimate daughter by his servant who then passed the daughter along to surrogate daddy Engels — as the ultimate proof of Marx's and Marxism's denial of women as anything more than biologically necessary components of the reproductive labour process. Corpophobia, and its resultant erotophobias, including disdain for all but biologically functional sexual activities, has been a defining characteristic of Marxism and other traditional leftist movements, as well as their religious and totalitarian rightist adversaries. To see all oppression in strictly economic class terms does not acknowledge any other possible points of identification or allow for multiple identifications.

The concept of beauty has all too frequently been seen in a binary opposition to that of usefulness, and thus the lucrative beauty industry has flourished with high exchange values and questionable use values. A combination of increasing amounts of both leisure time and disposable income within relatively



Still from *A Short History of Water*, Gary Kibbins (1989, 16 min)



Still from *Marx: The Video—A Politics of Revolting Bodies*,
Laura Kipnis (1990, 27 min)

unregulated economies has resulted in flourishing body-fixated industries. In *Marx: The Video*, Kipnis depicts both corporate and public and/or state interests as regulators of women's and other (gay male) problematic bodies. Consumer capitalism standardizes bodies, while the state still attempts to control them by legislating reproductive choice and access to AIDS treatment drugs. Bodies apparently liberated by the egalitarian surface of permissive consumer capitalism are in fact under siege by both private and state interests.

Recreation and leisure tend to be social activities—from particular recreational activities evolve clubs, friendships, even subcultures or communities. Both “communist” and “community” derive from the word “commune,” referring to a society in which people share assets and accessories on an egalitarian basis. But communes are not necessarily communities or communistic. Communities often identify their members through coded consumerist practices.

John Di Stefano's tape, *Tell Me Why: The Epistemology of Disco*, sarcastically but lovingly revises a period of recreationally utopian history. From the birth of the modern gay liberation movement came the formation of a visible community. With political visibility and acceptability, secretive codes became signifying commodities, and gay men with the necessary amounts of leisure time and disposable income—and prerequisite demographics of race, class, age, and physical beauty—were free to be playful consumers. The recording industry realized that this new market had its own music—disco—and other product manufacturers quickly realized that codes meant commodities meant sales.

Yet disco was hardly just a recording industry supply product for a burgeoning market. Disco, not unlike house and rave in the nineties, is arguably a more communitarian form of music than, say, classic rock. Certainly disco has had its divas, its cult producers and DJ's, but the schism between performer and audience characteristic of classic rock (or, for that matter, opera) is significantly diminished by a music intended for dancing. Under the disco light, gay men danced, cruised, flirted, met, and scored. To paraphrase Andrew Holleran paraphrasing Yeats, it became difficult and sometimes even impossible to tell the dancer from the dance.²

This period of ecstasy could not be sustained. Burgeoning queer politics challenged the assumptions of a dominant gay male consumer community and exposed its limitations. In the eighties, consumer capitalism's embrace of a homogenized gay-male market was disrupted by the AIDS pandemic. Bodies that economic interests had cautiously declared desirable were now considered diseased and contagious. Many of the men who experienced the ecstasies of formative disco have been lost to AIDS-related illnesses, and many of those still alive are now fighting for their bodily rights, denied by both repressive governments and multinational corporate interests. Di Stefano

dedicates *The Epistemology of Disco* to those dancers whose bodies have been claimed by AIDS.

Today in the nineties, body and health rights activists prefer to deal from a distance with both governments and multinationals. Activists are justifiably wary of potential co-optations. Body and health activists are also aware of the degree to which financial inequities affect not only access but also leisure time available for activism. The very existence of money reinforces inequities. If, as Marx prophesized, a necessary proletarian dictatorship were to be succeeded by a truly classless society, would that classlessness be maintained while money still existed? My suspicion is that money or capital would be a nemesis to any sort of egalitarian anarchy.

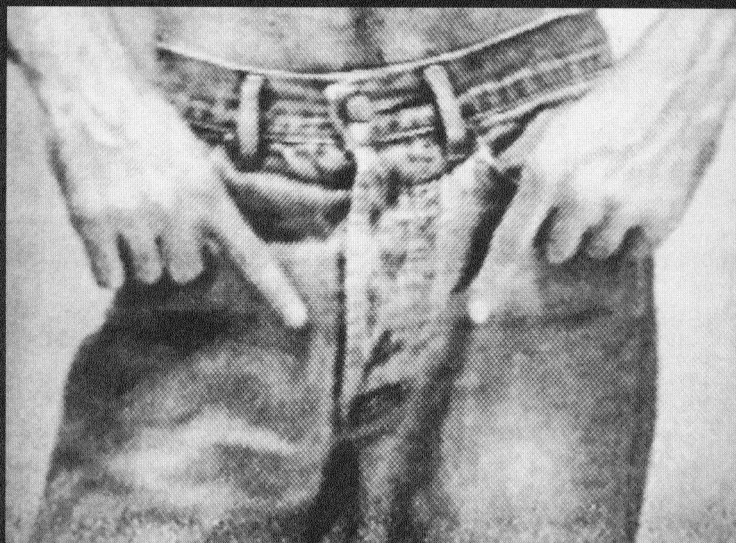
Gary Kibbins's *A Short History of Water* imitates an academic slide-lecture to posit a hypothetical replacement of money by water as the global medium of exchange. Money, after superseding the barter system, quickly evolved from being a functional convenience of the exchange process to a medium with its own exchange values and thus desirable for its own sake. Consequently, money cannot help but create and then reinforce economic inequalities. Kibbins posits water as a fluid alternative to money. Water is elemental—it has a high use value and a relatively low exchange value. Because water is constantly in motion, transactions would be particular to given situations—after all, one never crosses the same river twice. In contrast to money, a medium that has long usurped the particulars of transaction, water could hypothetically provide the ideal currency in a unified, utopian world.

Since the days of Plato and Thebes, water has gained in exchange value because its distribution has been altered by forces of capitalism and imperialism, as well as by forces of nature. Nevertheless, it would be wise for corporations, individuals, identity groups, and bureaucracies to realize that direct exchanges, which allow room for personal negotiation and provide space for play and performance, can be more personally fulfilling to the parties involved than puritanically regulated or cynically selected exchange systems could ever hope to be.

—Andrew J. Paterson

Notes

1. Craig Owens, "Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. 63.
2. Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (1978; New York: Plume, 1986), p. 5.



Still from *Tell me Why: The Epistemology of Disco*,
John Di Stefano (1991, 24 min)

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