

Monoculture : a recent history (Nav Haq)
MUHKA - Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp
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(translated from French by Molly Stevens)

ANTWERP



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Renzo Martens and Cécile d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise, *White Cube* (trailer), 2020, video, color, sound, 8 minutes. From "Monoculture: A Recent History."

"Monoculture: A Recent History"

MUSEUM VAN HEDENDAAGSE KUNST ANTWERPEN (M HKA)

It is somewhat ironic to have to speak in brief about the prodigious new exhibition "Monoculture: A Recent History," organized by M HKA associate director Nav Haq. One could see the show as a reflection on the simplification society—*simplicistic* society, even—in which we now live, an era where rash judgments reign. It is as if there were a systemic resistance to grasping the world's complexity, even though we've never had such a clear image of it. The exhibition suggests that our current reality, far from being holistic, is structured by various factions of thought. Each is entrenched in its position, no matter how extreme, and the show illuminates the resulting battlefield of one-way conversations, with everyone wanting to impose their particular morality on others. It also highlights the mixed, often paradoxical realities appearing in the gaps between contending parties.

Specifically, "Monoculture" attends to a range of univocalities and blind spots in scientific research, food production, and monetary and aesthetic value systems. The parallels drawn are telling and fertile. More subtly, the exhibition integrates the senses into this seemingly purely discursive terrain. The shape of the galleries (some specifically modified for this show), the lighting, and the general design register distinct ambiances that correspond to differences in thinking on a subliminal level.

To take one example, near what would constitute the center of the show is a gallery with an indefinable form. One almost feels it to be a place of transit, a passageway, as if it weren't strong enough to hold any significant content or the attention of a visitor. The works in this space seem to engage phantasmic dichotomies: European/African, white/black, monetary value and its absence. Between these antagonistic positions, a strange sense of emptiness emerges, as if feeding a third, spectral reality, often abstract or ethically paradoxical and not really habitable by anyone.

Here are some of the works on display in this space: a ca. 1978 negative black-and-white Marilyn Monroe from Andy Warhol's "Reversal Series," 1979–86; the trailer for a 2020 film showing Renzo Martens's provocative construction of a "white cube" in the middle of the African bush with the support of a local artists' enterprise, mimicking a capitalistic logic; an untitled white T-shirt from 1994 by Felix Gonzalez-Torres with the slogan NOBODY OWNS ME written on the back; and a dollar bill signed by Andy Warhol in 1981 along with four dollar-sign screen prints, posthumously issued in 2013 by some Belgian printers to whom Warhol had ceded the right to produce them. Rounding this all off is a copy of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* in a glass display case, briefly "summarized" through an extended caption next to it.

Every single room of this amazing exhibition functions in a similar way, though with its own specificity: Mapping underlying ideological dichotomies through the combination of the works, the lighting, and the architecture, the juxtapositions show unexpected nuances, sketching an incredibly dense and accurate portrait of our times, accounting for their inner complexities. Presenting the works of forty-two artists next to some famous, controversial, or underestimated theoretical books, magazines, and exhibition catalogues (by the likes of Benedict Anderson, Simone de Beauvoir, G. K. Chesterton, and Friedrich Nietzsche) and improbable but revealing items (*A Record from Ronald Reagan to All Californians*, distributed for his 1966 gubernatorial campaign), this exhibition is as intense as a whole biennial, while occupying only one level of the museum: a rare stroke of genius.

Translated from French by Molly Stevens.

— Yoann Van Parve

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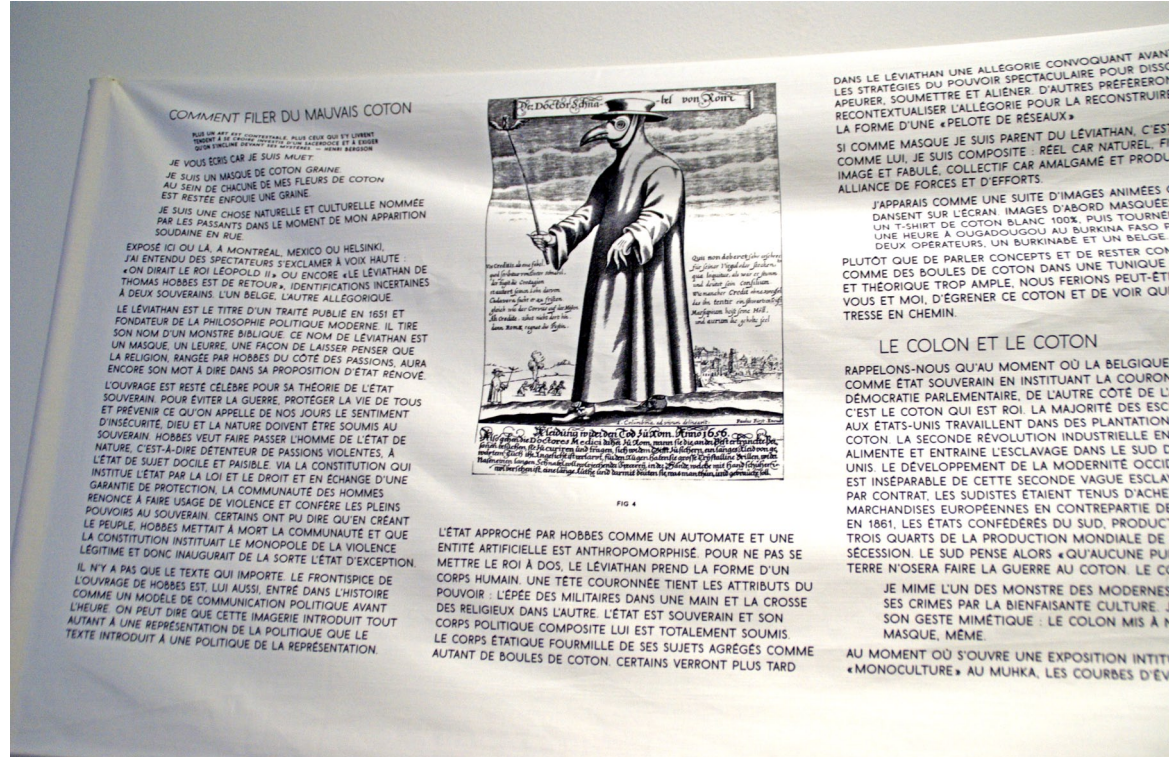
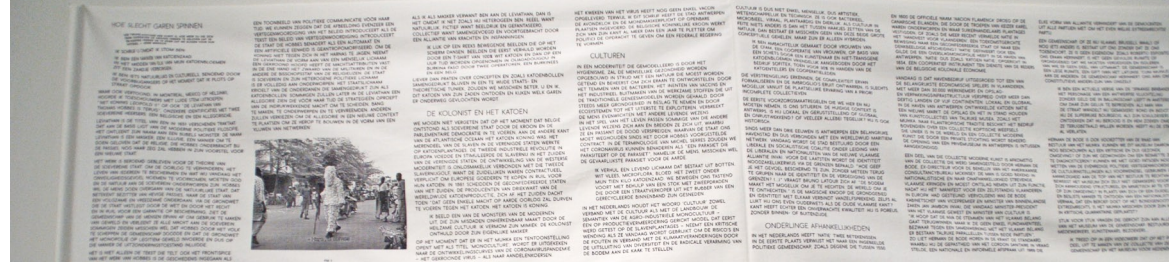
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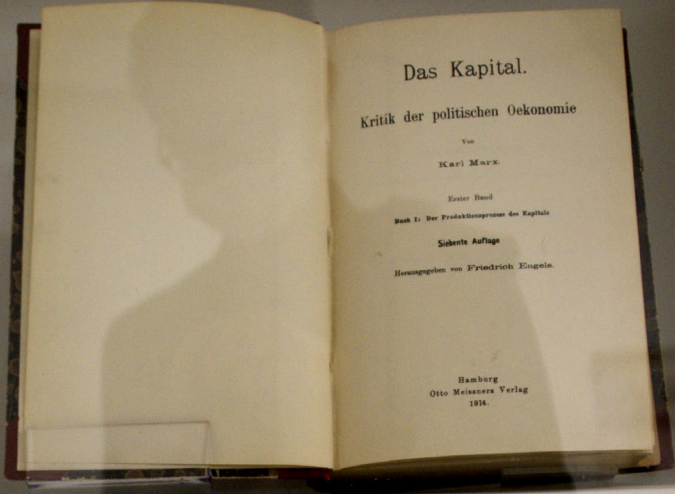
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Karl Marx, *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, 1914
 Uitgegeven door / Published by Verlag Otto Meissner
 Capital. A Critique of Political Economy
 Het kapital. Kritiek van politieke economie

■ Karl Marx (1818–1883) was een Duitse filosoof, econoom, historicus, politieke theoreticus en journalist en wijdde hij zich gedurende meer dan twintig jaar aan de ‘wetenschappelijke’ analyse van het kapitalisme. Marx’ uitgangspunt was de politieke economie. In *Het kapitaal* baseerde hij zich op de ideeën van filosoof en econoom Adam Smith, econoom David Ricardo en socialist Thomas Hodgkin, alle drie Britten, die hij verder ontwikkelde. *Het kapitaal* is Marx’ hoofdwerk. Het bestaat uit drie delen, waarvan er twee na zijn dood werden samengesteld en gepubliceerd door zijn vriend Friedrich Engels, die ook jarenlang zijn medewerker en vaak ook co-auteur was. In het eerste deel concentreert Marx zich op de analyse van de uitsluitingsmechanismen van arbeid door het kapitaal. Nadat hij het concept van ‘meerwaarde’ heeft geschetst – waarde die gecreëerd wordt door de arbeiders, die de kosten van hun eigen loon overschrijdt, en die de kapitalist zich toe-eigent – betoogt hij dat die meerwaarde de basis vormt van de kapitalistische productie en ultiem voortkomt uit de onbetaalde meerarbeid van het proletariaat in loondienst. In een kapitalistische economie met haar constante behoefte aan het realiseren van meerwaarde, reproduceren de arbeiders voortdurend de economische omstandigheden waaronder ze werken. Marx voerde aan dat het kapitalistische systeem, gebaseerd op privéwinst, zichzelf uiteindelijk zou vernietigen doordat het de kapitalist verrijkt en de arbeider steeds dieper in de armoede stort. De buitengewoon invloedrijke ideeën van Marx, gebaseerd op de oppositie van sociale klassen, hebben geleid tot de vorming van een filosofische school die arbeidersbewegingen en intellectuelen over de hele wereld inspireert.

■ Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher, political economist, historian and political theorist. He dedicated more than twenty years to the scientific analysis of capitalism to create a grounding for his ideas. Taking as a starting point the political economy elaborated by British writers Adam Smith, David Ricardo and socialist Thomas Hodgkin, he developed and transformed their ideas into an incisive critical analysis of the capitalist mode of production in *Das Kapital* (1867–1894). Marx’s major treatise, *Das Kapital* is composed of three volumes, two of which were compiled and published after his death by his lifelong collaborator Friedrich Engels. In the first volume, Marx centres on the analysis of capital’s mechanisms of exploitation of labour. Having outlined the concept of ‘surplus value’ (value created by workers in excess of the cost of their own labour-cost and appropriated by the capitalist), he argued that the surplus value forms the basis of capitalist production and has its ultimate source in the unpaid work of the wage-earning proletariat. Thus, in a capitalist economy, they labour. Marx argued that, based on private profit, the capitalist system will eventually destroy itself. Extremely influential, Marx’s ideas based on the opposition of social classes, has formed a philosophical school that inspires workers’ movements and intellectuals around the world.

