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LOL Cats: In Marx For Cats the Internet Confronts Its Favorite Meme

by G Douglas Barrett and Mr. Love Bunny, Sailor Boy, Mr. Big Stuff, and Little Moo

marxforcats.com

Marx for Cats, a new collaboration by Caroline Woolard, Or Zubalsky, and Leigh Claire La Berge, is taking the relation between the internet and its favorite species, the cat, to the next level. Launched four weeks ago—on the 101st anniversary of the Russian Revolution—and to many tweets and shares, Marxforcats.com hosts a series of short videos in which La Berge, a professor of economic history and critical theory, explains key concepts from the works of Karl Marx to a group of (sometimes) attentive cats. The website, designed by Zubalsky, is revolutionary red in color, and viewers can select different topics from Marx, including Finance Capital and Alienated Labor, that La Berge presents to the cats. “What is a commodity?” a demure La Berge asks the felines. “It’s something that is made by wage labor and sold on a market,” she then answers. Some of the cats appear amused by her analysis; others appear indifferent. One simply walks away from the camera.



Video still from MarxforCats.com video series, Leigh Claire La Berge, Caroline Woolard, Or Zubalsky, 2018-2019. Courtesy the artists.

Marx for Cats might represent the end of a certain internet experience, one epitomized by the cover of Kenneth Goldsmith’s recent book *Wasting Time on the Internet*. On that book’s cover sits a perfectly fuzzy, perfectly cute, grey-striped kitten who seems to communicate to the reader: you know very well you are looking at me. We are all, in some sense, wasting time on the internet. But Marx for Cats goes a step further as it both performs and critiques how the internet cat has come to function as a visual synecdoche for a certain economy, what the communications scholar Dan Schiller has called “digital capitalism.” Whether on Facebook or Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat, all browsing and looking—all staring into space—is now commercial. The internet cat then arrives to interrupt this state of affairs: it’s cute, conniving, and playful; nothing bought, nothing sold. And yet still we stare into the commercial digital domain. This paradox is in some sense the content of Marx for Cats. Much clearer!

Of course, an artwork about cats on the internet discussing political economy must sooner or later address issues art's commodity status itself. The question is put to the cats: "Is art a commodity?" Art is a commodity that wishes it were otherwise," La Berge suggests, as one cat stares directly at her while another decides to take a nap. Both the ambivalence of art's commodity status and a hope for its overcoming have long motivated Woolard's and Zubalksy's work. Woolard is well known for her economically-oriented collaborations, including the art advocacy group BFAMFAPhD, and for years she and Brooklyn-based artist and designer Zubalsky ran Trade School, an online, international network of schools based on barter and facilitated online which had, at its height, had chapters running around the world.

Perhaps Marx for Cats's most timely video to date is their election-day special, entitled "Katzenjammer." A "katzenjammer," La Berge explains to, this time, five attentive—and sometimes fighting—cats, is a German word that translates to something like "historical hangover," but literally means "cat's wail." The group's election-day piece is based on La Berge reading Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* to the cats. In that essay, Marx explores a question that is certainly relevant today, two years into Donald Trump's presidency: under what conditions will a property holding, bourgeois class, cede their political rights and let their democratic institutions, such as suffrage, lapse in order to preserve their economic status? Marx explores this question by tracing how a "buffoon," a "simpleton," Louis Bonaparte, was able to seize power in a coup d'état, ultimately ending France's Second Republic and eventually returning the country to an empire. Marx suggests society was operating under the "spell of a katzenjammer," a kind of fog that prevented the ideals of France's 1789 revolution from being realized.



Glass Cats made for MarxforCats.com video series installation, blown glass, Leigh Claire La Berge and Caroline Woolard, made possible by a residency at Pilchuck with gaffers Jason Christian and Daryl Smith and assistants Phoebe Stubbs and Emily McBride. Courtesy the artists.

In this section, La Berge tells the cats that, "at the risk of appearing didactic," she would like to read to them from Marx's text. "Bourgeois revolutions," she begins, "like those of the eighteenth century, storm more swiftly from success to success, their dramatic effects outdo each other, men and things seem set in sparkling diamonds, ecstasy is the order of the day—but they are short-lived, soon they have reached their zenith, and a long Katzenjammer takes hold of society before it learns to assimilate the results." Two of cats sitting at her feet begin to fight with each other in rather dramatic fisticuffs, and a cat sitting beside her nips at her gesticulating hand. They do seem to understand Marx's concern: bourgeois society promises more than it delivers, and at any moment those promises may come undone. France had a series of democratic, even radical revolutions, but by 1852, an emperor whose primary achievement was being Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, was firmly in power.

Marx for Cats might also be located in what scholars of multiple disciplines have broadly called the posthuman turn—that odd nexus of technology, animality, possible emancipation, and possible further alienation. Brian Massumi's book *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (2014) comes out of this body of thought, but Marx For Cats suggests we have something to teach animals as well. Are cats like us, or are we like cats? Which subjects among us, it must be asked, will find a redemptive quality in moving beyond the

human as the recipient of art, education, politics, and which subjects will be further alienated in a posthuman future? And here questions of race, class, and gender certainly come to the fore. Speaking of the future, one has to ask about the very durability of the Marx For Cats project itself. It's undoubtedly a fun endeavor. Viewers will absolutely enjoy the first twenty or thirty seconds of each video, and, indeed, a few of my colleagues have already said that they plan to use them in their college classrooms to introduce Marx. But certainly Marx for Cats will have to confront the question: just how much time can we—or should we—waste on the internet? If viewers follow the lead of the cats themselves, they might well quickly turn their attention to other treasures. MFAs for Cats, anyone?

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Featured in Marx for Cats, Mr. Love Bunny, Sailor Boy, Mr. Big Stuff, and Little Moo live with the Senior Art Editor of the Brooklyn Rail.

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