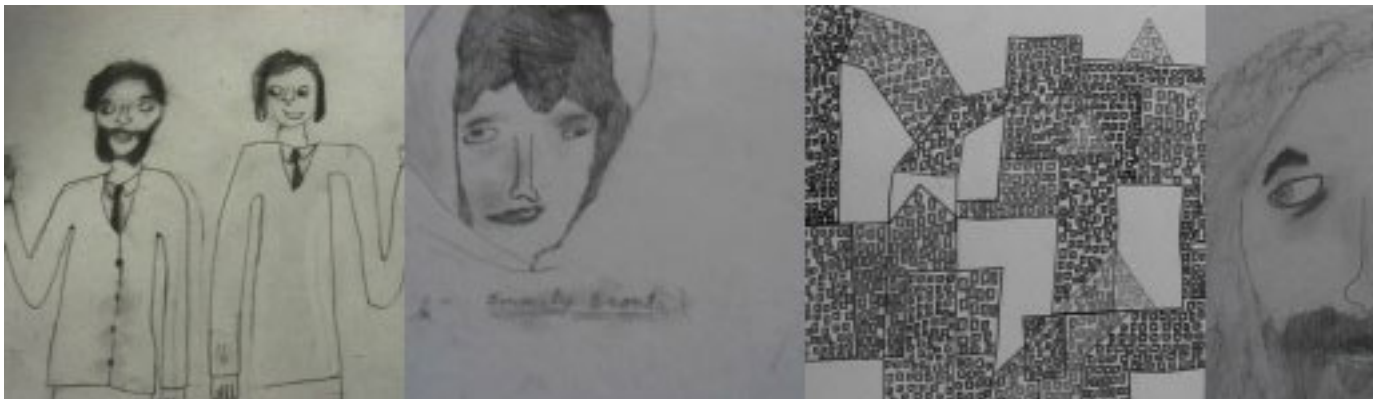


# Portrait of Karl Marx as a young god

Lars-Erik Hjertröm Lappalainen on a work by Gernot Wieland



Gernot Wieland's video Portrait of Karl Marx as a young god was on display for the first time at the abc Berlin art fair last fall. After having watched this hardly one minute long work, consisting of filmed drawings and a voice over, I met Wieland for a chat. It evolved into an interview. Below you find exactly what Wieland said, but also how I, having seen his work, understood him. I put it all on his account, though: he is the only one speaking, and sometimes it is just me showing my skills as a ventriloquist. Maybe I thereby ruined this interview – if you think so, please regard it as a piece of criticism. For my part, I consider it a documentary.



"Obviously, it is a fiction, but I actually think of it as a documentary. It is a documentary work on a desire. A desire for utopia, for Marxism, for a different society. And what makes it feel documentary to me is its absurdity. It is this moment when you say to yourself, this cannot be real – that is a reaction you only have when confronted with a reality. This sense of irreality is never produced by a fiction. As unreal as only reality can be:

this desire, and this character, they have this quality. And this desire is real, it is there. Maybe he is the character of desire, but far from an Oedipus. He, the character of desire, has an object that is kind of vague, unknown (Marx as a young god, for example). And just as its end is unknown, so are its means. So, the punk attitude – “don’t know what I want but I know how to get it” – is no longer an option, we simply don’t know how to get it. You just have to try. Therefore, the ideas and arrangements of this character are eminently impractical, but they might work.”

“The narrator tells us about the making of all those drawings. A kind of naïve drawing appears and the voice tells us “This is a portrait of Karl Marx. We made more than a thousand portraits of him and of his friends.” Who is “we”? The narrator connects it immediately to Marx, and Marx to friendship and to a portrait made by “us”. “We” drew them, he says, but you cannot really be sure he was not alone, and that this “we” only expresses his longings. But he probably feels that he speaks for a “we” that actually exists, but without having recognized itself yet. Maybe he experienced something like a prefiguration of a community while working on these drawings. The drawings reveal a new possibility: that everything might, already at this moment, be part of a different kind of community, a not yet recognized one. The form of a different way of relating to others and to organize a society seems to have struck him, as an experience of a fact, when he drew these images. Where was he at that moment? Community is a question of place, or rather of distance. What the narrator lacks is a certain distance to the images. But I also believe that the character found the right distance in the end, in relation to the last picture. The voice says: “Portrait of Karl Marx as a young god, it says.” “It says” – as if the speaker was not the author. Where did it come from, this distance? What does it consist in?”



“The film deals with this absurdity and this distance. The problem then is: how do you tell a story about this absurdity? You need the images to do it. Language is too excluding, it tends to abolish the real absurdity, tends to translate the desire into a doctrine, the very coherence of which produces a new and different kind of absurdity, the one proper to fundamentalism. How do you tell the story without reducing it to a new form of limiting representation? And a story about desire for Marxism and humanism and utopia is even more difficult. Because: how make a story about humanism when humanism has become a joke? How tell about utopia when utopia is condemned? The character of this film is actually too straight on with his desires. He speaks too much and his pictures are too definitive, like definitive statements. So that makes them in principle preclusive, not open, as at the same time they are extremely inclusive: everything can be Marxist. But almost nothing is. Everything, but not white: white is not Marxist. Sometimes I wonder if that is the reason he is drawing, to cover the non-Marxist white with colours that at least could be Marxist. ”



“There are only two colour pictures in my film. They are almost like memories of Marxism, or of utopia – but they kept their colours. One of them is of places, because utopia is a place, an open one. Think of our squares, very political places, or our streets, made for parades or demonstrations – public manifestations of our relation to ourselves. They are almost symbols for the “open society”. Demonstration has proven almost utopian (in a bad sense). I mean real demonstrations, the ones which really have an issue and are not only saying “war is always bad”, they are not met by anything but violence. The second colour picture in my film is taken from an anti-Shah demonstration in West Berlin. A young man was killed by a police officer during that demonstration. “A young man” – he had a name, actually, a well known one in Germany: Benno Ohnesorg. He was shot in the back of his head from very close range by Karl-Heinz Kurras. It is a picture of anger. Anger is the only emotion, which is directly addressed in the film. It is a reaction to the end of the open society. It doesn’t work anymore, or at least, no one is interested in it at a political level. Neoliberalism has made us less free and the society less open. But at the same time, it is humanism, Marxism, freedom, equality and solidarity that have become a joke.”

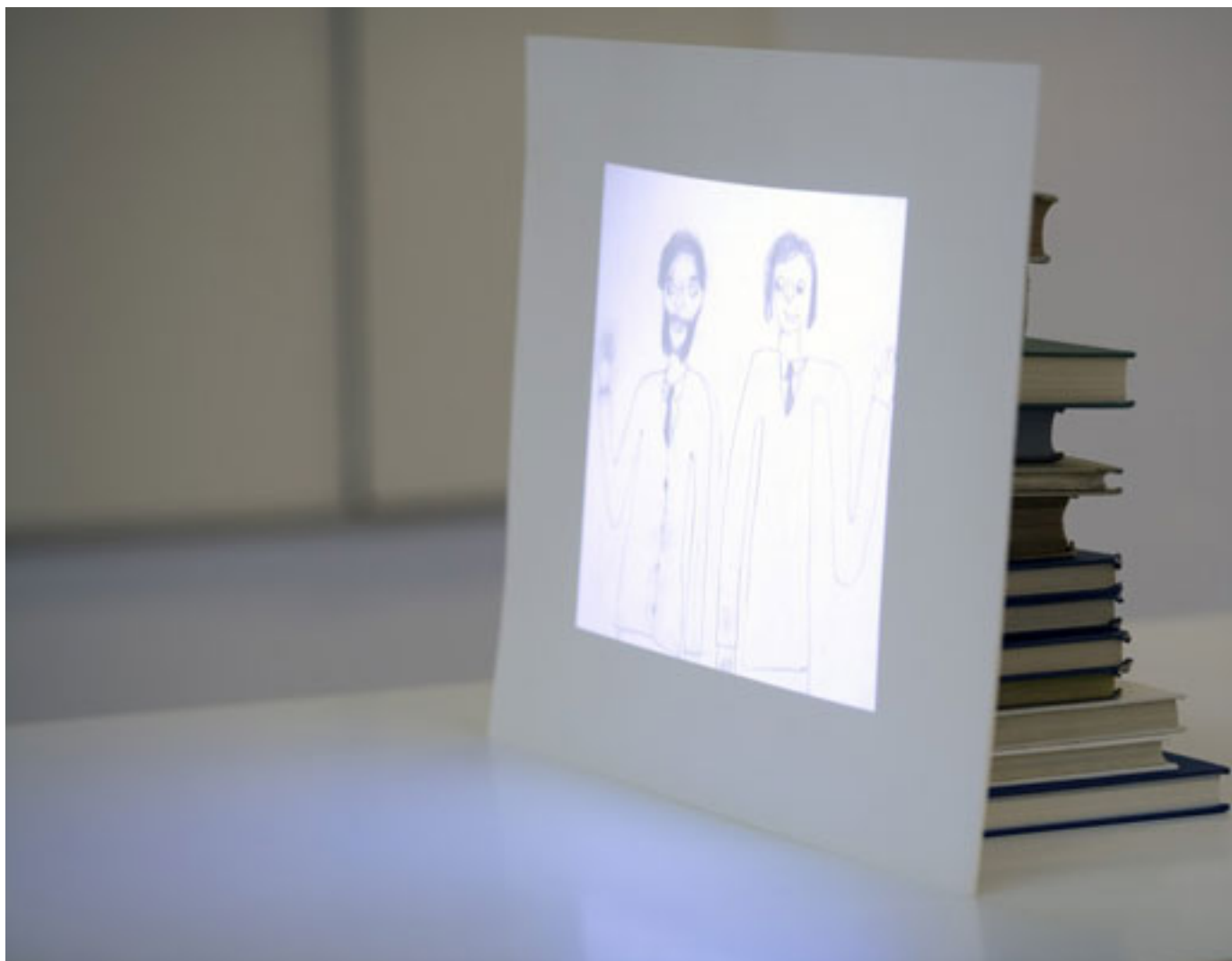
“These places of utopia must be understood in a different sense, or be constructed in another way. The distances must be managed differently. The use of a telephone is significant in this film, I mean the fact that he speaks over the phone. The typical sound of the voice over the phone marks a distance. An open ended distance actually, since there can be no one at the other end of the line. It is a monologue, so no one is actually needed – there is no place for any one else. But still, since it is over the phone, there is also the (absurd) idea that someone could reply or give an answer. There is the idea of a response. The telephone is actually like an incarnation of the idea of a demonstration. This crying out loud to whoever would be at the other end, this dream of getting a response, someone who picks up the phone and actually speaks to you about what you just said. A real



demonstration is only a bad realisation of this idea of an open line – and, as I said, it ends badly if you really have a just cause for demonstrating. The distance provided by the telephone is actually lacking in demonstrations. You could hardly imagine a demonstration with a sense of humour, or an absurd demonstration. And everything comes from the fact that it is really open ended, this distance over the phone: It is an open line: you are invited, not included. Just pick up the phone, do something in reply to this character. “

“It is important to consider utopia because I think it happens, utopia happens, from time to time behind your back. Behind your back is already a strange place, like the one of humour, like utopia, an open line. The solitude at the end of the line is also important. When I read Marx, I do it through Freud. Then it becomes clear that Marx writes a lot about solitude, absolute solitude. That is, some kind of confinement, about a lack of openness, the lack of conditions for an openness. Also in utopia, as a political thought, there a disastrous solitude is inevitable, exactly like in all the politically constructed societies in space and time. But as a desire, utopia works differently – also, as a desire I think it is almost invisible, you don’t notice your own desire for utopia. But you can detect it in other kinds of desire. So, when I read Freud, on desire, I do it through Marx. And then, it is just as clear that desire is not shaped by an exclusive relationship to your mother and father, but that the father is already composed of a bunch of desires, also of other peoples desires (his boss’s, for example, or his wife’s). Where you expected to find a psychological solitude in relation to a family, you find an entire community of different desires. Only from time to time they come together, almost like a unity but without really being one. In humour they are one, open ended. You are that open line, an open place that anybody could take possession over for a while, a place where any two desires or subject could meet or clash as a momentary unity. That’s the desire of the humour or the humour of desire. It lives from fortuitous meetings of heterogeneous parts, and connects the two ends of the line for a little while. I guess that our conscious desire for utopia comes from the experiences of those moments. The difficulty consists in finding out what to do with them, and how to give them some consistency.”

“Maybe you wonder why the portrait of Marx doesn’t resemble Marx. Again, how to negotiate reality? And here is the answer. It looks just like Marx, as a young god, of course. Not many have seen him like that, but they did, the ones who drew the picture. A young god, that’s consistency enough, I guess.”



*Stills from Gernot Wielands video Portrait of Karl Marx as a young god. Published 2010 at tsnok.se*