

Ghost Looking for its Spirit. / 2012 / SLINKO.

Synopsis:

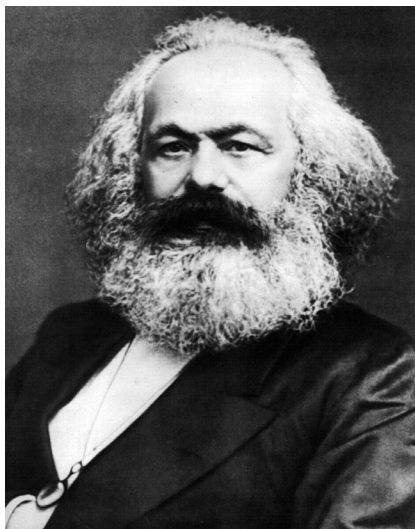
The video “Ghost Looking for its Spirit” opens on a small person in blue overalls standing under the monument to Karl Marx in Chemnitz, former East Germany. Then it cuts to the same character, the worker with name tag ‘Karl’, pushing a giant steel wool beard through a small American town. While the worker pushes the beard by a ubiquitous Walmart and McDonald’s, the voice over recalls a personal history of growing up in the Soviet Union, and asks Marx for answers about failure, hope, doubts and convictions.

*What was your research work like on creating your piece?*

The title for “Ghost Looking for its Spirit” came from Marx’s writing in which he compares the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848, and writes that, “awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, K. Marx)

I initially conceived “Ghost Looking for its Spirit” as a public performance to engage the passersby by asking a question about a possibility of a socialist revolution. The performance failed entirely, not because ‘socialism’ is a scarecrow in the US, but simply because no one would approach me while I was pushing the beard around. After a while I managed to edit the material into a short video.

However, the work really originated a year before, while I was putting together a show “Make-Belief”, explicitly addressing my Soviet background for the first time. One of the pieces was titled ‘Crowd-Pleaser’, — a giant steel wool beard, a ghostly symbol of communist ideals. It was based on the monument of an enormous Marx head by Lev Kerbel, a gift from the Soviets to GDR government in 1971, still in place in Chemnitz, Germany.



Karl Marx,  
1875, portrait by John Jabez Edwin Mayall



Crowd-Pleaser (detail)  
2011, 98 X 50 X 36" steel wool, wood framing, hardware

*Which aspects of your creative process would you like highlight (aesthetic, ethical, poetical, political etc.)?*

Someone said to me once that my work was political with a small 'p'. I think political art is a heavy burden to bear, too much responsibility with too many constraints. On the other hand, I have issues with 'art for art's sake' kind of approach. Poetics of my work fall somewhere between one's sense of civic responsibility and desire for absolute freedom. It's a contradictory place, and I often resolve to a comic relief.

In "Ghost Looking for its Spirit" I thought a lot about these conflicting affinities in my personal history. Born and raised in what used to be the Soviet Union, and now living in New York, I find no easy answers in search for more progressive ethical, political, or even aesthetic resolutions. To illustrate my point, in the video the voice-over asks, "Most of the things I own are made in China, does that make me a communist?" This confusion of terms and ideas is intentional, as it points to the inherent conflict between China's ideological stance and its role as producer and provider for global markets. There is a certain inseparability, mutual suspicion, and fascination between communism and capitalism. In terms of anthropology, they are each other's 'other'.



Karl  
2012, work overalls and name tag for  
"Ghost Looking for its Spirit"



Studio  
2011, work reference for "Make-Believe" show



*How do you locate the conception of this piece in relation to your own poetics?*

Just as historic events take shape through individual lives, so does a piece become embodied through specific locations, artifacts, and meshing personal journeys with historic contexts. A chain of smaller events affected what “Ghost Looking for its Spirit” became in the end.

As mentioned before, I first made the piece “Crowd-Pleaser”, the steel wool beard, for a show, without ever seeing the original monument it was inspired by. The back of the piece was charred, so it looked like someone had been camping inside of it. One day, the maintenance crew had to repair steel staircase nearby, and the steel wool caught on fire!

“Crowd-Pleaser” came back damaged, but it gave me an idea. To give a spectacular farewell to the past, and to a sculpture I could not afford to store, I would set the whole thing on fire. When, eventually, I traveled to Chemnitz, Germany to see Marx’s monument, I brought some ashes with me, and there was a moment of closure. I later learned that Karl-Marx-Allee where the monument is located popularly referred to as “Nischelgasse” (“Skull Alley”). I think it’s pretty funny.



Crowd-Pleaser (details)  
2011, 98 X 50 X 36” steel wool, wood framing,  
hardware, cynderblock, charred wood

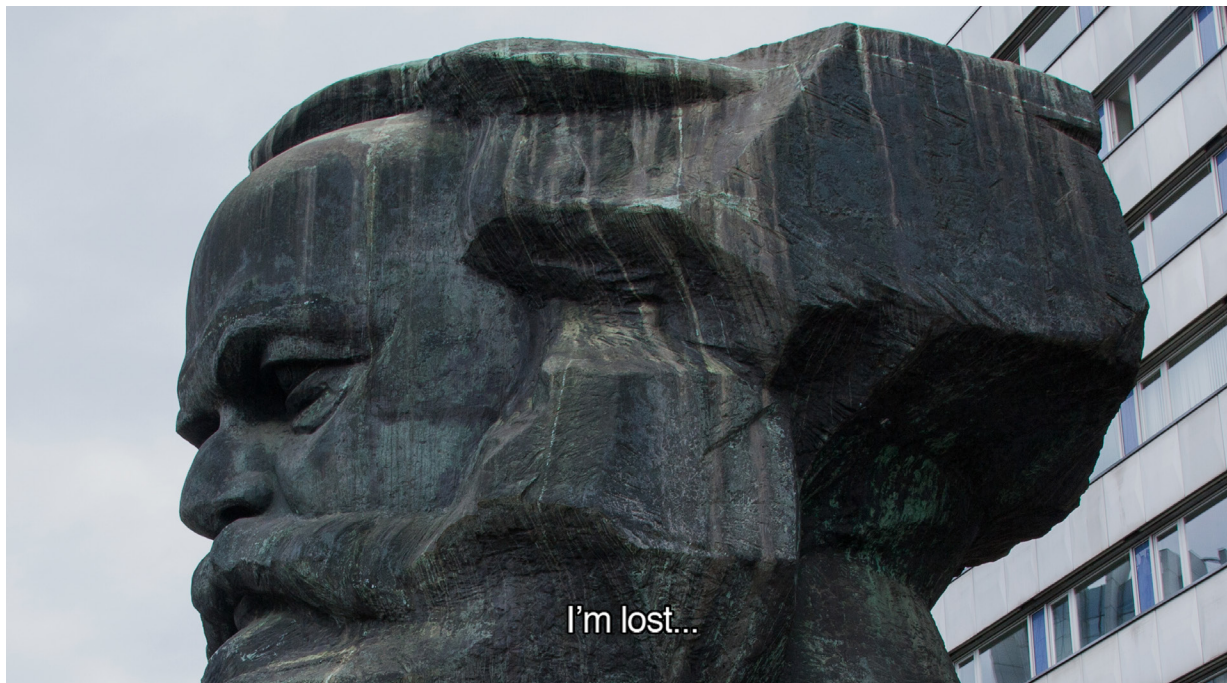


Ghost Looking for its Spirit  
2012, production stills

*Which references from the art world or other fields of knowledge have driven the creation of this piece?*

In general, I don't think of my work as responding to any particular art world aspect. But in this case I have to admit "Ghost Looking for its Spirit" responds to the idea of a cultural worker out there in a field making immaterial art. As someone living, eating, and needing a place to sleep, I find the whole 'immaterial' discourse unconvincing. Even images and thoughts have very specific physical origins and properties, tracing them back to bodies, energy, labor. I'm very stubborn in believing that these things matter.

My reflection on relationships between people, objects and ideas, can be best described as an anthropological fieldwork within the aesthetic, economic, or political. I think someone like Michael Taussig poetically articulates these ideas in his *"I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own"*. It's an indispensable little book full of insights into the nature of drawing, socio-politics of landscape, and empathic understanding for others.



Ghost Looking for its Spirit  
2012, production stills



*What contemporary and/or historical experiences, fictions, and narratives does your piece address?*

Using a very personal and at times comical approach, the piece acknowledges fragmentation and deterioration of concepts like labor and class, and overall diffusion of clarity of what anyone is fighting for. In the video, the ghost of a failed revolution is looking for a new spirit and a new body to inhabit to make itself relevant once again. The video ends with footage of the sculpture set aflame by the worker as the camera pans to a small building with a sign that reads 'Solidarity'.

Although somewhat lighthearted, "Ghost Looking for its Spirit" is really about looking for new answers in old questions. It reflects on failure in Beckett's words: *"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."*



Ashes  
2012, "Ghost Looking for its Spirit"



Karl Marx & Slinko  
2012, sculpture by Lev Kerbel, Chemnitz, Germany