The Political Energies of the Archaeomodern Tool

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In his provocative account of the relationship between representation and politics in Representing Capital (2011), Fredric Jameson observes the many figural flourishes by which Marx discloses a horrified awe of capitalism. Notably, these flourishes are occasioned by those moments in which the capitalist system becomes spontaneously animate in its confrontation with the collective power of labor. Where Jameson attributes an ontological status to these autonomous entities (capitalism and labor power respectively) under the rubric of “spirits” and “forces” as per Marx’s historical moment, I would describe them as vital energies whose political vectors are charted by the historically specific scenes of production, reserve, clash, and/or discharge. For example, when the organization of factory machines springs to life, as though at the behest of “demonic power,” or when collectivity “begets in most industries a rivalry and a stimulation of the ‘animal spirits’ which heightens the efficiency of each individual worker,” Jameson reflects that “the choice between a ‘good’ description of capitalism (as constant revolutionizing and innovation) and a bad one (as exploitation and domination) is in fact a political choice and not a logical or scientific one; a choice that must be made in function of the current situation, and whether people can be politically energized by the negative — anger — or the positive — hope.”

In Jameson’s characterization of Marx’s literary forms, the work of politics and the work of machines share in an energetic current, the ground from which the intentionalities of politics emerge. Not only was Marx keenly aware of the qualitative role of energy in the specific character of capitalism (and not just its quantitative role in powering the perpetual growth of the system), he was also attuned to the way that energy charged his representation of it. More to the point, this energy possesses a coextensive political and aesthetic valence by which multiple political positions could be generated and shaped from within that very system. One might even say that the energetic dimension of representation in Marx becomes the condition for a discursive ecology — a polyphony of criticisms, forces, collisions, oppositions, latencies, and possibilities that stand in resistance to capitalism’s seamless absorption of labor.
This chapter shows how the energies of representation implicit in Marx’s figurations allow us to rethink critical modes of existence within a political ecology. I consider how political energies have historically been registered as dissimulated forces that haunt the terms of representation but also shape the world to come. This tradition has a striking resonance with the recent preoccupation with an archaeo-modern perspective of the economy, in which political power can be gauged in its representation as a potential energy that inheres in petrified objects. I discuss the thematic of the petro-object through a discussion of several works that appeared in the 2015 Venice Biennale. Here, we see the specific formation of labor energies referenced only by manual tools discovered in posthumous environments — that is, in scenes of ruination in which assemblages of the workforce appear as prehistoric artifacts that have been buried and encrypted in the earth. I argue that this coextensive setting into history and setting into the earth of labor energies signals a paradigmatic shift in materialist thinking from economy to political ecology. However, as Bruno Latour points out, such a reorientation is demanding and not without its share of hauntings from modern conceptions of the political. Yet, following Latour, we may be able to shape such a turn by speaking and seeing political energies “crookedly,” which is to say, by finding them running through new ontological formations. Inasmuch as political energies are generated by and directed within complex assemblages, these same assemblages disclose the potential to take hold of the vectors of political conflicts. More precisely, in rethinking the ontological transections between technology, human labor, and earthly forces that produce such assemblages it becomes possible to chart their potential for redistributing our political capabilities and sensibilities.

The Monstrous Energies of Capital

Marx’s varied representations of capitalism frequently revolve around its systemic depletion of energy. While his figurations of capital deal primarily with forms of consumption, these are not to be mistaken for the cultural vices of greed and pleasure in accumulation. Rather, the insights of Marx’s figurations develop in Capital into an increasingly sophisticated consciousness of capital’s insatiability for both human and nonhuman forms of energy. If the feudal landscape consisted of agricultural social relations that were relatively easy to map, the rapidly industrial landscape of the mid-to late nineteenth century took much more critical work. Thus he is at pains to find a modern form that would encompass the paradox of an expanding self-expending system. Such a contradictory energetic model gets figured as monstrous, and thus Marx personifies the shift from mercantile capitalism, a basic exchange model, to its modern form as interest-bearing capital, as the emergence of an economic Moloch, a pagan god that demands the sacrifice of children and animals, and whose appetite is never sated. Marx writes,
The complete objectification, inversion and derangement of capital as interest-bearing capital — in which, however, the inner nature of capitalist production, [its] derangement, merely appears in its most palpable form — is capital which yields “compound interest.” It appears as a Moloch demanding the whole world as a sacrifice belonging to it of right, whose legitimate demands, arising from its very nature, are however never met and are always frustrated by a mysterious fate. ²

Capital thus provides no plenitude whatsoever from its accumulation. Rather, its exchange is born of a sacrificial logic. In this reading, capital does not demand like a hell mouth that must be fed, but rather, proliferates through ever more exchanges to become an expanding system that depletes energy with every transaction. Like the Moloch, its appetite is for the world, and therefore it cannot be placated with a token portion of a society’s wealth. Marx’s point is that the demand for sacrifice is integral to the surplus value model of capital, so that the derangement of capital occurs in the world’s circulation of wealth which takes place as its own self-consumption.

In this vein, Frederic Jameson argues that capitalism is both a self-organizing system and a dialectical totality (a unity of opposites) by which it can be understood as open and dynamic, but whose operation is nevertheless premised on a fundamental closure.³ The system must expand and absorb in order to exist; but at the same time its requirement to perpetually enlarge — to find energy sources and absorb them into exchange — is the condition of its closure. It cannot stabilize or else it will begin to die.⁴ Once the system is engaged, moreover, it precludes all economic alternatives or criticisms, which simply become sources of strength and resilience. The lynchpin of this system, however, is the unity of capitalist production and unemployment.⁵ Unemployment is the essential state of depletion on which capitalist production functions and expands, since the strategic control of labor as a form of energy management (whether to keep stockpiled, or to deploy for maximum yield) guarantees the possibility of exploitation at the level of production, which can then be claimed as profit through exchange. Thus, while interest-bearing capital is a system that consumes expansively and uncategorically, it nevertheless demands a sacrifice in its particularity, as the lives of the unemployed given as tribute. The sources of energy that feed the depleting system change over historical epochs, yet unemployment remains capitalism’s universal demand. Thus, the difference between the phases of capitalism, and the specificity of its globalization, are differences in the forms of unemployment reserves.

Where Marx was keenly attuned to the fact that labor was not just the functioning machinery of the system but a source of energy in its own right, Jameson mobilizes his figuration of capitalism to account for the status of labor in the contemporary economy. He therefore notes the global scale of populations who are held in standing reserves of energy precisely through the imprisonment of unemployment. The larger
the reserve of unemployed people, the cheaper labor becomes, and the more demand for the world’s resources increases, the more wealth remains in circulation gaining value without being used in the interests of individual livelihoods. This configuration sets the terms for leeching human energies in order to power exchange for its own sake, while impoverishment becomes naturalized through the ideologies perpetuated in events such as war, terrorism, massive refugee migrations, and environmental disasters. The global supremacy of capitalism has been powered by failed nation states, ethnic genocides, terrorism, and environmental crises that guarantee its supremacy as though through a process of traumatic bonding. On this point, Jameson follows Aaron Benanav’s emphasis on the relationship between surplus populations and the production of surplus value. However, where Benanav argues that, concomitantly with the growth of the system, capital accumulation produces surplus populations redundant to the needs of capital, Jameson attenuates this claim to suggest that Marx’s key insight is that unemployment is structurally central to the dynamic of accumulation and expansion which constitutes the very nature of capitalism as such. Thus, surplus populations are not mere by-products of the system but are rather the sacrificial lives that it claims as its very energy source. Following Althusser, Jameson draws the conclusion that capitalist accumulation and unemployment are borne out coextensively through an axis of exploitation and domination.

Representation as Derangement of Labor Energies

When Jameson argues that the representation of capitalism finds itself making a political choice to view it positively as constant revolutionizing or negatively as exploitative, and that these choices are energically charged (positively by hope or negatively by anger), he locates the possibility of rearticulating the mechanisms of that system through precisely these political energies. That is to say, the seemingly magical process of deranging capital into interest-bearing capital can be undertaken as a representational procedure by which labor is inverted from its positive energies to its negative ones. A consciousness of the labor substructure thus occurs through the energetic derangement of representing capital. Moreover, such derangements of representation are ways of tracking shifts in forms and modes of political resistance, in addition to the technical composition of what we might term the fossil-fueled exploitation of industrialized labor. From within capitalism’s representation of itself to itself, derangements can occur that give rise to a new visibility.

This insight is crucial to theories of the social history of art. T.J. Clark’s analysis of realist painting in the nineteenth century, for example, is attuned to the energetic charges at play in the politics of representation. He notes such charges in Millet’s politics, as he elaborated through his paintings of gleaners and other peasant laborers over the course of the mid-nineteenth century. In his earlier paintings of the 1840s, Millets aggrandizes his peasants, drawing on Michelangelo’s Sibyls or Raphael’s Virgins as figural models. These figures incorporate the automaticity and brutality
of their labor, mobilizing a “savage physiognomy.” The combination of grandiosity and brutishness lends his paintings a “philosophic melancholy” in their “monotonous ugliness,” in the words of Baudelaire. In this regard, Millet’s compositions and figurations open the representation of the peasantry from a poetic mythology of the noble poor to associations with the more dangerous and unruly banlieue peasant. As Clark points out, the factory workers of the Paris suburb were considered to have a recognizably degenerate physiognomy. More than this, the banlieu peasant was a dislocated and uncertain character of modern life; as people left rural France for work in the city, they relied on gleaning in the woodland of Barbizon, an intermediary zone between the agricultural communities and the urban factories that were also the sites of peasant uprising as gleaning rights became more stringently regulated and even forbidden. The project of classicizing labor was not just a matter of elevating the figure of the peasant, but also of paring down the landscape, rendering it sublime and threatening, suggesting revolutionary power in simplified, ambiguous spaces. Labor power was not simply embodied through figuration, but in his paintings of the mid to the early 1860s, he articulated it as a latent threatening energy that pervaded the landscape (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Jean-François Millet, Man with a Hoe, 1860 – 1862, Oil on canvas, 81.9 × 100.3 cm (32 1/4 × 39 1/2 in.). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
Clark explains:

In 1850 Millet was still ready to draw that terror directly. In his later works he tended to suppress it: there were no more redskins in the forest, and no more twisting lines and contorted postures. But there was always violence, as an undertone to plain description: Death visited the woodcutter, grass smoked like pyres in the landscape behind the Man with a Hoe: an abandoned harrow, a flock of crows or a misshapen tree stood for more than themselves, an abstract menace which grew more sinister as Millet grew older.11

In other words, the political force of Millet’s work arises in the very abstraction and dispersal of the proletariat, unformed and yet perceptible at the junctions between rural and urban landscapes, traditional and modern life in the mid–nineteenth century. Labor power itself was deranged into a suppressed and seething energy waiting to erupt into revolution. The subtlety of Clark’s analysis comes from his assessment of how new formulations of both the labor classes and the unemployed asserted themselves into the visual field as a consciousness that could be abstracted from literal figuration. Moreover, precisely as an abstract disruption, such representations become politically charged, for in their staging of sites of labor but resistance to the existing relationship between figure and ground, worker and land, the paintings open the possibility of a new political form to come. The abstraction signals both an absorption of existing figurations of labor into the unmapped terrain of the Barbizon forest and at the same time, a potential energy which would be carried forth in a figuration that was as yet unrecognizable and therefore uncontainable. Millet therefore redistributed the aesthetic terms of the figure-ground relationship to posit the obsolescence of the rural proletariat and an anticipatory ethos that signaled a future revolutionary whose energy is derived from its emergence out of a feral topography. This return of the figure to its earthly ground in order to encrypt an existing political form, as a gesture toward its energetic reinvigoration and in such a way as to alienate and invoke the reformulation of the visual field, is also at stake in the contemporary era, which is witness to intensive procedures of deterritorialization due to global scale resource extractions and the restless flows of mobile surplus populations.

**Petro-Objects and the Ruins of Global Politics**

This dialectic of figuration and abstraction informs my reading of the political energies that charged the Arsenale art exhibition of the 2015 Venice Biennale, organized under the title *All the World’s Futures*. Important here is the anachronism of *futures* in the aesthetic imaginary of the Biennale which is read against the historicity of land and labor in the nineteenth century. What Millet figured as a future contradiction is refigured as both the obsolescence of industrial labor and the revalencing of politics.
through an anticipatory figure inferred only by way of discarded manual tools that wait to be claimed in *All the World’s Futures*. The exhibition’s Marxist currents were articulated with particular force in the recurrent appearance of inert, broken, or appropriated tools and obsolete sites of manual labor.

The curator, Okwui Enwezor chose three intersecting “filters” by which to govern the thematics of the exhibition, with the goal of producing an aesthetic sense of the global political landscape: “Liveness: On epic duration,” “Garden of Disorder,” and “Capital: A Live Reading.” The three filters convened a set of artworks that articulated the profound turmoil of world politics while foregrounding the representation of labor and exploitation. While the exhibition emphasized the “liveness” of political formations with a focus on mass movements such as protests, immigrants, refugees, and humanitarian catastrophes, the performances, documentary testimonies, and other time-based media were set into relief by the persistence of historical ruins. Thus, the curator opens his statement by quoting Walter Benjamin’s famous ninth thesis from his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” about Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*:

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.12

Like Benjamin’s angel of history, Enwezor invites a sensitivity to the wreckage of contemporary politics — the debris of failed nation states, abandoned buildings, archaic tools, all of which appear in consonance with a consciousness of the unemployed and other disenfranchised populations.

The most remarkable example of the exhibition’s Benjaminian aesthetic was the Latvian pavilion, an installation by Katrina Neilburga and Andris Eglitis entitled *Armpit* (2015) (Figure 2). The installation was designed as a hybrid architectural structure, combining the style of an Eastern European woodshed (common in Latvia, whose prime export has traditionally been lumber) and the private garage, which has become the site of appropriation by cooperatives that repurpose them as workshops. Built out of recovered wood, brick, and metal fragments, the makeshift space of the pavilion featured photographs and videos of a world of male laborers — lumberjacks or rural
workers who, in their leisure time, or in periods of unemployment, take over garages to make a space for tinkering with electronics and other kinds of machinery. One corridor of the pavilion had a large workbench covered in old metal tools. The artists present garage culture in Russia and Eastern Europe characterized as an aesthetic ground, a “brutal techno-romanticism” that takes its inspiration from the Thoreau character in *Walden*, Alek Therien, who borrows an ax and fells some slender pine trees in order to build a hermit shack for himself. Yet, such spaces are predicated on labor that exceeds economic production. Where Thoreau’s *Walden*, and its meticulous inventory of basic supplies and acts of survival, offers a panacea to the suffocating drudgery of the urban factory and its correlate poverty and sensory deprivation, *Armpit* recovers this aesthetic enrichment through the satisfaction of a labor without instrumental purpose or economic gain.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 2. Katrīna Neiburga and Andris Eglītis. ARMPIT, 2015 – ongoing. Mutimedia art installation. Still from the video. © artists, LCCA.*

The curator of the pavilion, Kaspars Vanags, explains that the story of garage men inhabiting the periphery of Europe is a pastoral of the digital age. Yet, he calls their work a form of “self-exploitation as a leisure time activity... a time capsule where neoliberalism has enclosed the postindustrial proletariat.” He considers the terms of the pavilion’s aesthetic:

Here the rules adopted in the world of garages and lumberjacks are clearly felt. One can only guess what they might be... 1. The order of things must be at least natural, if not self-evident. 2. Functionality, with the exception of that associated with a woman, should not be beautiful. 3. Away with the decadent nonsense of metrosexuality — any woman knows that the hairy armpit of a man, albeit sweaty, is perfect for cuddling and feeling at home.
Armpit presents an exclusively male world and yet even masculinity is laid bare as a subject formation in its obsolescence. The garage men combine a historical form of artisanship, with an equally long history of manual labor to make a new formation — a tinkerer who appropriates architectural structures in their demise and uses them for nonproductive labor. The wood fragments that make the scaffolding of the pavilion hark on the Latvian woodshed, and thereby suture the figure of the garageman with the tradition of artistic training in Latvia by which students would take over woodsheds as studios to train in plein air painting. Thus, the woodshed space sutures together the men’s nonproductive manual work and the aesthetic sensibility for archaic spaces and tool-working.

Figure 3. herman de vries, sickles from to be all ways to be, Venice Biennale, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

Where the Latvian pavilion vividly reproduced these spaces of excess labor, other works in the Biennale take up the political trajectories of excess labor energy solely through the presence of the tools of manual labor in their nonfunctional state. herman de vries’s installation, to be all ways to be in the Dutch Pavilion undertakes a deconstruction of nature and the agricultural landscape of the Netherlands (Figure 3). Each wall provided a grid of natural specimens — one wall a set of pigments derived from plant substances; another wall a set of samples of the plants themselves; on
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pedestals stood a selection of minerals. In the middle of the room was a large circle composed of 108 pounds of dried rose petals whose aroma filled the room. Right next to this, the artist laid out a selection of dozens of sickles and plans. In this way, de Vries redistributes the historic episteme that connected nature, the peasant laborer, and agricultural production into a display of natural history by which botanical specimens and tools alike become artifacts in a common continuum. The manual tool becomes an archaeological entity; a fusion of geological matter and historical form excavated from the earth as though a new type of petroglyph: a petro-object.

Chinese artist Xu Bing likewise mobilized tools and construction debris in his monumental Phoenix (Figure 4). The work, actually a pair of two monumental phoenixes, originally commissioned for a set of office buildings in Beijing, is comprised of the remains of the urban development that took place when that city was preparing for the 2008 Olympics. Close inspection of the majestic forms yields metal panels, steel beams, chains, pipes, hard hats, saws, and other remnants of the construction sites. These ready-made components of the phoenixes were a tribute to the migrant workers enlisted to undertake the massive transformations to that city, as well as to the thousands of displaced people who were forcibly removed from their properties for the development projects. The work subtly preserves the evidence of this labor and exploitation, even as it revisits a grand national symbol of China's might. Phoenix gives full articulation to global capital itself: a new and beautiful Moloch that simply absorbs ever more elaborate forms of labor, leaving only the obscure material evidence of its energy source.

The rhetorical statement of the Biennale's visualization of labor is clear: the era of manual labor and its energies has been buried and encrypted in the bedrock of the earth itself, a tactic of containment in the era of finance capital. Yet, the remnants of labor return as petro-objects, artifacts of that buried labor. Moreover, it is not coincidental that the tools of labor qua archaeological object appears in an age when extractive technologies provide the global economy's most lucrative resources (fracking for oil and natural gas as well as mining). The staging of an excavation of the remnants of another era of labor signals the rendering inert of labor and its burial as the wasted remains of modernity. Moreover, these excavations make apparent the containment of labor as potential energy. (I would go so far as to describe labor power as a petro-fuel in its own right.) In this sense, the return of manual tools as art encompasses the formation of the labor class in the global economy as both an archaic energy source, and one that might be viewed alternatively as a displaced revolutionary power, here rendered as a sublime ethos in the manner Clark describes the energies of Millet's late paintings. The tools are laid out as neutral objects, but are available to be picked up once again. The archaeological aesthetic threaded through the Biennale galvanizes a consciousness of how prehistoric earthly energies, currently directed into the economy, threaten to change their valence and become revolutionary.
The Energies of Political Ecology

The Venice Biennale formulates a sense of the political landscape not simply by inferring a consciousness of the energies of labor that power the economy in petro-objects, but also by positioning these in “posthumous” environments and situations. (I take the term posthumous to refer both to the understanding of dead environments and the root of the word “humous”, to mean of the soil or earth.) That is to say, the curator’s recall of Benjamin’s angel of history is more than just an invitation to consider the ruins of modernity, vainly and melancholically trying to make sense of them in the aftermath of change; it is to do so with a specifically ecological thrust. Thus, the Benjaminian foundation of the exhibition takes on a new relevance as an earthly politics, charged by the possibility of a revival and redistribution of the intimate relationship between land and labor.

An ecological turn can be deciphered in the latent political energies that reside within the artworks, waiting to be activated by the viewer. In this regard, the exhibition demonstrates what Bruno Latour identifies as a vacillation between a modern notion of economy and ecology. In his *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An
Anthropology of the Moderns, Latour outlines the fallacies of the modern worldview, and its emphasis on science and politics. He takes issue with how these respective models produce facts and truth claims that orient the knowledge of “the moderns.” Significantly, his analysis interprets “the moderns” anthropologically, which is to say, his deconstruction assumes a cultural distance by speculating on a worldview to come. Thus, he examines modern culture in hindsight, as a thing in the past, or at the very least, in its passing. This rhetorical device complements his argument which insists on viewing the world “crookedly,” which is to say, to understand the autonomy of ontological entities that are otherwise rendered invisible to the modern eye, but which are inferred in our very language. Where economy is a production of the modern paradigm that simply cannot account for the emergence of earthly disasters, including global warming and the disastrous positive feedback loops it creates planetwide, Latour advocates for a shift from economy to ecology, which would require an embrace of an entirely new and monstrous political sphere that includes such autonomous entities. His approach is deeply concerned with the speech acts that produce facts, and thus, as he puts it “the ancient division between words and things, language and being.” Ultimately, he seeks to galvanize language, which is otherwise deficient. Language, he says, has to be made capable of absorbing a pluralism of values. This absorption, though, would admit that words carry ontological weight, that they admit beings into existence, so that we regain the power to enter into contact with types of entities that had no place in modern theory, but which can find their place in a political ecology. He proposes a pluriverse as a new political sphere.

Latour introduces several “beings” in his anthropology, and he does so by making incisions into domains of knowledge, demonstrating how to give ontological weight to the beings that such knowledge produces, and then mapping their trajectories, conditions, and alterations to which they are subjected. Of particular relevance is his explanation of beings of technology, which he refers to with the graphic spelling, “[TEC].” Latour executes his own version of Heidegger’s breakdown of technology into the fourfold causes, rejecting the modern penchant for associating technologies with inventions, means, or extensions. Instead, he approaches the concept through the essential qualities of technological beings, namely their capacity for shifting us through displacements in time, in space, and in the type of actor. Technological beings take us through but also implicate us in a global equipment that operates through an altered causal logic. He calls this the recoil effect of technological beings. Humans are not the origin of action (we do not act on matter or manufacture through technology). Rather, humanity is the recoil of a technological detour. The history of technologies is a slow anthropogenesis, a co-extant becoming human and inhuman. Latour therefore aims to free technological beings from any association with instrumentalities and, in doing so, shift from the association of technologies with modernization, instead to suggest that when we encounter technological beings, we “ecologize” and are ecologized.
Latour’s understanding of technology in the context of ecology is relevant insofar as it opens a way to understand shifts in the valence of political energies in and through technology. Insofar as Jameson notes that the political field is divided between the political energies of hope in capitalism’s innovativeness and anger at its exploitative nature, Latour provides a way to view this dialectic as integrated into technological beings and to see ourselves as possessed by technology, within living assemblages of technological equipment. Such an assemblage is the ecological refiguration of Marx’s Moloch. Instead of a monstrous self-consuming system, the economy might rather be viewed as an autonomous and heterogeneous technological being that, rather than consuming its own energy source, could be politically charged and redirected from that very source. That is to say, in as much as we are becoming ecological, and as much as we are ecologized (whether we like it or not) by capitalism, its forces and trajectories can be and (must be) taken hold of via an understanding of its energetic systems. In this way, it becomes clear that new materialism emerges from historical materialism, and is strengthened by the acknowledgement of the latter’s complex account of the intersections of economy, technology, labor power, and representation.

It is therefore possible to link the recurrence of petro-objects and their archaeological formulation to the capitalist assemblage of extractive technologies by which capitalism powers and consumes itself. Petro-objects represent labor as the prehistory of modern capital — the burial of labor is precisely the procedure by which to render invisible the unemployed who fuel capitalism. Yet they are also provocations to exhume labor force, to see its energy as potential rather than as always already spent. A re-valencing of its energies might therefore be possible through a crooked interpretation of its machinery. We might, for example, see in Xu Bing’s phoenixes a revolution of China’s migrant workers in its dormancy rather than a show of that country’s global economic might. Moreover, the work does not merely dazzle the viewer with yet another display of China’s technological prowess, which traditionally displays itself as the sight of masses of people working together as a multitude, whether in factories, public assemblies, or the spectacular choreography of the Olympics. Instead, Phoenix charts a map for a reversal of the technological assemblage — each tool was wielded by a worker, who, in joining together with others could potentially take hold and redirect labor power. The work reads the image of the phoenix against the grain of a narrative of imperial resilience and instead subtly asserts a consciousness of labor power as a technological assemblage in and of itself.

Two sets of sculptures in the Arsenale section of the Biennale illustrate this point about the shifting of energies of the capitalist assemblage. Melvin Edwards encapsulates the artistic gesture of petrifying manual tools in order to revive buried histories of oppression. Known for his Lynch Fragments series, in which he addressed racial violence and the civil rights movements in the U.S., Edwards exhibited a sample of works that reference different phases of American activism from the 1960s, ’70s, and beyond. His sculptures, such as September Portion (1991), and Texas Tale (1992) are
composed of steel tools — shovels, pitchforks, hooks and chains — fused together into amalgams that suggest the manifold affordances of such objects, whether the instruments of specific forms of labor, the paraphernalia of enslavement, or the weapons of violent uprising (Figure 5). The fragmentary forms are thus invested with a generalized force in its petrified state, but nevertheless infer multiple avenues for the deployment of that force.

Monica Bonvicini likewise created two sculptural amalgams for her *Latent Combustion* (2015) (Figure 6). Here, a grouping of chainsaws and leather straps were cast in concrete and covered in black liquid rubber, and then hung by chains from the
ceiling. Though the chainsaws are perhaps among the most threatening and distinctly masculine of tools, nevertheless, the layout suggests an erotic overlay inspired as it is by the mise-en-scène of S&M sex clubs, so that the suspended grouping of tools is yielded to a libidinally charged probing of the objects’ potential energies, rather than their direct deployment in the context of capitalist production or exploitation. The title of the piece, *Latent Combustion*, implicitly draws the amalgam of tools into the domain of energetic systems. Yet the implied combustion is not that of a broiling factory but rather of the expenditure of energies through which subjects constitute (or perhaps reconstitute) one another in practices that deploy tools that have been unexpectedly cathexed by their uses in sexual scenarios. The restaging of dominance and submission through the specific roleplaying of power in the S&M encounter not only intimately connects the respective subject positions through the performative use of technological extensions, it does so in such a way as to reveal the potential affordances of those same tools. Thus, not only are the tools recontextualized from scenes of domination through labor to scenes of sexual roleplaying, they also become devices used to take control and redirect the valences through which power relations are forged. Thus, for both Edwards and Bonvicini, the historic tools of labor, though displayed in their latency, seemingly demand to be taken up in the service of energetic potentials that would revalence the assemblages in which we are imbricated.

I link the staging of petro-objects at the Biennale to what Jacques Rancière describes as Walter Benjamin’s “archaeomodern turn.” Insofar as the curator identifies Benjamin’s visualization of modernity in ruins as a guiding trope, the petro-objects of the exhibition are connected to Benjamin’s specific materialist history read through the debris of modernity. Benjamin applies his variations of Marxist dialectics specifically to the phantasmagoria of the arcades. Rancière examines Benjamin’s dialectical turns that ensue from the specifically archaeological condition. Benjamin shifts the Marxist dream of emancipation to a deferral of that dream through its positioning in a prehistoric (archaeological) fantasy in which emancipation is both in a state of ruins and anticipated as a future to come. He then enacts an infinite regression of emancipation that sinks ever deeper into an archaeomodern phantasmagoria. This spiraling movement takes place through linguistic, spatial, and figural turns. Rancière argues that the modern drive forward and postmodern fragmentation were always already dialectical accomplices and that Benjamin leverages the dialectic into a radicalized state of irretrievable meaninglessness. If Hegel characterized the modern condition as an opposition between the prose of modernity (the linguistic mode of economy, bureaucracy, science, and philosophy) and the failure of romanticism (symbolism as the mind trapped inside itself, unable to exteriorize and realize itself as representation), he equally leveraged from this opposition the possibility of a modern imagination with a figurative faculty: a form of reason that is captive within the exteriority of representation, sealed up in exteriority, a “thing of reason.” From this, Rancière opposes two fantasies of reason: a “bad” one in which reason is
simply anachronistic and anarchical, and a “good” one, in which reason is sealed in its prehistory, a lateness that is also an anticipation of interpretation, reading, deciphering. Thus can we understand Benjamin’s archaeomodern turn as one in which the emancipation from the prose of science and philosophy takes place by locking up the dispersive power of meaning, to make a “sleeping meaning, waiting for its liberation but also anticipating it.”

In this vein, Rancière argues that Benjamin establishes a classic opposition between the factory, the Marxist substructure and presumed original scene of labor oppression, and the arcades, as the superstructure of bourgeois leisure, desire, and consumption. However, Benjamin reverses their position, so that the phantasmagoria of the passages become the originary scene of emancipation: the site where reason and the potential for emancipation are encrypted in a fragmentary state, where it sleeps but also, importantly, where it generates a dream of reason and awaits liberation. Not only has the superstructure become the substructure, but the arcades enact a perpetual deepening of the dispersal of reason. Instead of a demystification of the commodity and its scenes of display and discard, Benjamin finds us engaging more deeply with
it, regarding it archaeologically in the sense that we follow it backward in time, discover the dialectical opposite of modernity in its prehistoricity, its “not-yet” and unfulfillment as a dream of the future to come.

The archaeomodern turn presupposes a new turn — one turn more. The deeper the dream, the further the awakening, the more consistent is the evidence of the modern cogito, of the collective subject of modernity. Just as the dream becomes a phantasmagoria... So the logic of the archaeomodern might be a logic of the one-turn-more, a logic of the regressio ad infinitum, located at the core of the modern project.\textsuperscript{23}

This infinite regression brings Benjamin’s intervention to its full radicality. Yet, it is not without risk as well. Insofar as Benjamin sets the scene for the phantasmagoria as archaeomodern return, it invokes a collective, heterogeneous subject position to undertake the recovery and awakening of meaning. There is no presumption of who the revolutionary subject will be — not the bourgeoisie or the laborer — only a radical opening of liberatory subjects. Moreover, there is always the risk that Benjamin’s turns of Marxist dialectics defect to a postmodern condition: an intensification of the phantasmagoria to the point of its reification as simulacrum. Yet, Rancière insists that Benjamin’s ultimate contribution, the final turn of his archaeomodern spiral, is his insistence on a Messianic philosophy which takes the form of a counter-theology whereby the redemption of the object is predicated on the total foreclosure of its extant meaning into arbitrariness and indeterminacy. Hence, the impetus to disidentify with heritage or the ruling order takes the form of a catastrophic blast of the present into ruination. In this way, he reminds us that the phantasmagoria is also a Lethe, a river of the dead where:

\[ \text{[M]eaning is produced as the presence of death-in-life and deciphered as the presence of life-in-death. By contrast, a detheologized Benjaminian approach would be tantamount to a ‘postarchaeomodern’ turn, the commodification of everything, the museumization of the shopping mall, a bourgeois dream that remains bound to the victor. Such a discipline would amount to nothing more than a history of the social imaginary as narration of economic processes and social relation — a materialist geography as antique shop or world fair.} \textsuperscript{24} \]

Herein lies the connection between Benjamin’s phantasmagoria and the vitalism at the heart of Bruno Latour’s political ecology. I am suggesting that between the petro-objects and their inference of vital assemblages, the Biennale invokes the emergence of as yet unknown political energies nested within the death and suffering of the
capitalist economy, in its very wreckage. As such, it occasions an emancipatory dreaming that disassociates the petro-object from its originary modern contexture, and imagines it in operation in a different assemblage, politically charged through a crooked interpretation of its potential use or disuse.

The Heterogeneous Energies of the Petro-Object

Fredric Jameson argues that where it is often assumed that Marx conceived of the unemployed as a secondary feature of capitalism, in fact his figurations of capitalism demonstrate the centrality of structural unemployment, a condition that comes to the foreground as one of its core contradictions today. However, it takes the form of massive populations who have “dropped out of history”: failed states, victims of famine and other natural disasters, ethnic genocides that are funded and fueled by First World countries, and other populations who are managed through NGOs and international philanthropy. At the 2015 Venice Biennale, this reserve army of the unemployed is inferred through an archaeo-modern lens, in manual tools presented as petro-objects. Such a lens exposes the fact that this reserve labor force has been consumed by the self-sacrificing system — Marx’s Moloch — subsequently buried and lost to history. Yet the curator produces a speculative environment for the recovery of such populations, in the inferences of the energies of their sacrificed labor. These energies become visible as an excavated geological force — tools discovered as though with no preconceived knowledge of their potential use. Such a neutralization of the tools of labor in a posthumous environment generates an alternative perspective of the global condition.

As Latour suggests, we might view technologies themselves as integral to a more expansive and autonomous assemblage of beings. Thus, we might view the energetic field of petro-objects retroactively and proactively, not simply in terms of the encrypted labor energies they harbor, but the potential political energies that they channel forth. Though, as Rancière suggests, such a reading of capitalism’s ruins take place in a regresio ad infinitum, so that the object is radically severed from its original installment in the technological equipment of modern labor. Yet, it is precisely the infinite deferral of an instrumental use of the petro-object that yields an opening to the heterogeneous energies of the concealed populations of the unemployed. The petro-object may, then, be the lightening rod for the polyvalent energies of a political ecology that opens the way out of capitalism’s self-expansion — a landscape of historical figurations that awaken the energies of labor from the crypt of a dying earth.
Notes

5. *Representing Capital* 147.
13. Indeed, in *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson describes utopian space precisely as a workshop, “a garage space in which all kinds of machinery can be tinkered with and rebuilt.” On one hand, he notes that these enclaves are aberrant by-products of social change, like an eddy in a current of progress and therefore not integral to a practical politics, and yet their existence at all registers the existence of agitation in the midst of transitional periods. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso Books, 2005) 15.