

February 2011



Rainer Ganahl: *I Hate Karl Marx*, 2010, video, approx. 5¾ minutes; in "Engineers of the Soul" at Postmasters.

ENGINEERS OF THE SOUL POSTMASTERS

This group exhibition borrowed its title from Joseph Stalin, who posited that artists and writers under socialism would be "engineers of the human soul." In the Soviet hierarchy, they would educate the public in a new way of life.

Postmasters's proprietors (and the show's curators) Magdalena Sawon and Tamas Banovich focused not only on that original project of social engineering, but also on work by contemporary artists who address its legacy. Photographs by Yuri Shalamoff and Lu Xiangyou portray Leonid Brezhnev, Nikita Khrushchev, Mao Zedong and other one-time Party luminaries, recording Communism's official pageantry and personality cults. They shared the gallery with more recent works by Wang Jianwei, Yevgeniy Fiks, the collective Chto Delat? (What Is To Be Done?) and Rainer Ganahl.

The Russian-born, New York-based Fiks presented O'Keeffe-style flower paintings (2008) depicting a hybridized begonia, the "Kimjongilia," which was bred to blossom on the birthday of the North Korean dictator.

The Austrian-born Ganahl's video *I Hate Karl Marx* (2010) is set in 2045 on Karl Marx Allee in Berlin. A German woman rants in Chinese at a statue of Marx (her tirade is translated in English subtitles) about living in an era when Europe and the U.S. have ceded their sovereignty and culture to Beijing. "Because of you, the world is united Chinese," she bitterly proclaims. While lampooning Western apprehensions about a coming "Chinese Century," the video also suggests that China's emergence as the engine of global capitalism could precipitate a new form of social programming.

The Tower: A Songspiel (2010) by the St. Petersburg-based Chto Delat?, on the other hand, conveys the idea that cultural agendas under Communism may not have differed so radically from those at play today. In this satiric 37-minute video (in Russian, with subtitles), actors dramatize a recent controversy over plans by natural-gas giant Gazprom to build a skyscraper in St. Petersburg's historic center. Recalling a Brechtian play, the video alternates between the intrigues of the tower's planning committee and songs of protest by a chorus of citizens. The committee—including a politician, a P.R. manager, a

security officer, a priest, an art dealer and an artist—plans a branding campaign, and its members each rise in turn at the boardroom table to rehearse a speech in support of the tower. "We will become the Dubai of the North," says one. The "artist" presents the group with a gilded, cigar-shaped sculpture emblazoned with Malevich's Suprematist cross. He calls it *Unity in Silence*. "The really political consists of silence!" he declares. Such works, he promises the committee, will make St. Petersburg a center of contemporary art. In this account, the artist-engineer now serves capitalism instead of socialist revolution.

—Tom Williams