Gregor Kregar and Fantastic Capitalism

Modern industry has established the world market.

Karl Marx [1]

Yet in its unlimited appetite for ever-increasing production and profits, this system creates at the same time a social universe of turmoil and self-destabilization.

Steven Marcus [2]

Gregor Kregar is an artist of the horde, the collectivity, the crowd, the multiple, the weird mob, and also a labourer in the factory of Fantastic Capitalism. An early work, *Another Round* (1999), comprises two large truncated icosahedrons, made up from hexagons and pentagons, in Raku ceramic. Each faceted sphere is bulky with money, with thickly modelled reliefs of New Zealand coins studding its surface like dangerous bosses on some retro-Medieval rolling siege engine. Kregar's chunky spheres are terrifying and captivating, ludicrous yet plausible in their gigantesque magnifications of our allegiance to what Marx calls money's "*perpetuum mobile* of circulation" [3], what Slavoj i□ek calls, the "mad self-enhancing circulation of Capital" [4]. Disturbing our sense of appropriate scale, pushing us into an imaginary relationship based equally on aggressive materiality and spectral unreality, these looming money balls are sublimely mysterious and grotesque. In their threat of malevolent momentum, they recall the stone ball in Steven Speilberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* that pursues Indiana Jones along a subterranean passageway, following an ancient logic of retribution, to crush the greedy intruder's attempted theft of a tribal treasure. They also remind me of the comparatively soft, almost squashy, large ball that bounced over earth and sea to momentarily smother and recapture Number 6 as he attempted escape from the benignly sinister compound of the 1960s BBC television series *The Prisoner*.

The 4 big spheres that came from Kregar's studio over the next few years were all double-sided eyeballs, *Oko* (1999), *Oko 2* (2001), and *Oko 3* (2002), and *Prstan* (1999). 'Oko' means eye in Slovenian; the symmetry of the word is matched by the sculptures' two-sided structure. While 'Prstan' means ring, and the work can be read as a wide banded ring form, it reads readily as a variation on the eye thematic; as an eviscerated double-sided eye. Seen from the side, the concave interior wall of the cut away globe appears to bulge deceptively across the gap like a replacement iris fretted by a tangle of internal blood vessels. *Prstan* has the most gothic sci-fi look of the 4 eyes; it recalls the hugely influential graphics of HR Geiger, who was designer for the film *Alien*; or the more high-brow drawings and models of paper architect Lebbeus Woods, whose imagery of post-war, apocalyptic decay

incorporates inorganic material growing in uncanny profusion. A welter of bars, rods and pipes clings to *Prstan's* exterior like wet ganglia of an eyeball ripped from its socket, or clinging vines that turn this ruined vision machine into instant archaeology. It's a nasty image of platonic form destroyed by the irruption of excessive physicality.

The *Oko* works keep things in place with more formal rigour, but they are highly unstable works. They are like the poet's eye, as Theseus described it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "in a fine frenzy rolling," that glances back and forth between earth and heaven providing the imagination with unknown forms that make their way into words and images, giving shape to apparitions and disconnected things. They have the 360˚ X-ray vision that Mad-Eye Mooney has in the *Harry Potter* books; Mad-Eye's all-seeing eye spins freely in its socket. What Kregar's eyeballs hold together in tension seems fragile stuff, or massings of material that threaten to explode outwards. They are unitary structures formed from a nervous multiplicity of parts. The pockmarks of mashed bottle glass in *Oko*, mimic the scattered discs of the coins in *Another Round*, as do the jutting ends of bottles in *Oko 2* radiating from their internal armature. These are bristling, brittle and agitated works whose intensity of glittering and translucent effects are met by an equally intense constructional language of fastening, clasping and bolting. Their obsessional grammar of assembly is as much on display, as much a special effect, as the eyes' mosaics of vitreous surface patterns. What this means is that the constructional grammar of Kregar's steel and glass eyes takes a modernist emphasis on the metonymy of construction to another power; in the process the status of this grammar changes to something decidedly postmodern. On one hand the laborious earnestness that characterises the making of the work relates to a modernist ontology of light industrial tectonics; yet in another way the fetishisation of the manner of assembly brings the work closer to the language of film makers' props and models.

The giant eyeballs are not quite mechanisms of the type that ii ek proposes as mediating between the material conditions of production and the virtual, fantasmatic space of appearances and apparitions. Such a mechanism, for ii ek, is a "machine that produces an *effect* in the precise sense of 'magical' effect of sense, of an event that involves a gap between itself and the raw bodily materiality mechanism is that which accounts for the emergence of an 'illusion'. The crucial point here is that the insight into the mechanism does *not* destroy the illusion, the 'effect', it even strengthens it insofar as it renders palpable the gap between the bodily causes and their surface effect." [5] I would redescribe ii ek's gap or hinge between the fantasmatic and the concretely physical in postmodern terms, as a formal trait that not only does not destroy the illusional, but through its 'mediation' bestows virtuality on the material while borrowing its rhetoric of physicality to intensify illusional effects. The inability to control the anxiously asserted physical and its haemorrhaging into multiple instabilities of the spectral is more determinate of Kregar's project than any reliably stable gap between bodily conditions and surface effects.

It is not that inflected languages of joining and constructing were not intensely pursued in much modern art and architectural practice, and often to a point of obsession and anxiety – one need only to think of the plating and bolting of Otto Wagner's densely textured façade for Vienna's Post Office Savings Bank, or Kurt Schwitters' post-cubist faceting of *Merzbau* crystalline form – but so many of the modernist languages of complex physicality depended on localised stabilities, oppositional principles of organisation, and relations to the particulars of place that are much more difficult to claim as dominant in our current phase of late capitalist globalisation.

The eyes, of course, are all globes too, green and blue representations of the world, their variously coloured zones connoting biosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere and atmosphere by turns. *Steel Life Planet* (2003) and *One More Round* (2005) are planetary before they are optical, though the total group of eyes, planets, and faceted spheres augment each other in their metaphorical plays between microcosm and macrocosm, the one and the many, rolling and spinning, the all-seeing eye and global comprehension.

If at face value the various spheres represent the One, the all-encompassing form and Idea, Kregar's project is equally populated by the many, by the busy multitude. *Roke* (2000) is an installation of 1500 stiff clay hands arrayed as a dense mass. Installed and spot lit at night in a window of the Auckland Art Gallery, its rigid gesture repeated over and over, *Roke* suggested a congregation of the damned about to disappear from sight, but it also conjured up newsreel images of night time Nazi rallies with dramatic lighting. The ambivalence of such fascist associations in relation to totalitarian ideologies has been endlessly played on by the collaborative Slovenian project Neue Slovenishe Kunst that includes the rock band Laibach and the group of artists known as Irwin. An avid fan of this Neue Slovenishe Kunst in his youth, Kregar is well aware of the implicit links. *Roke* is a type of crowd, bound by its slavish obsequiousness before power, and frightening in its blind thronging.

Multiplicity of a different sort inhabits the heavy metal TV's of Kregar's *Steel Life* (2003) series; their gridded coloured glass screens are crammed with further examples of crowd imagery: a crush of gridlocked cars; an iridescent matrix of tropical fish; a mass of flowers. *–Archie* (2002), the bright red, triumphal arch is a temporary sci fi monument of close-packed urban detritus, a cage of inorganic rabble, technological cast-offs pulled together by a coat of paint. The 144 ceramic sheep of *Matthew 12:12* (2003) with differently coloured jerkins are a waiting crowd, each one 'individualised' by the artist's modification of the generic, cast form while they retain malleability at a certain stage in the production process.

I have already alluded to the assertion of physicality that characterises much of Kregar's practice. It is difficult to avoid always coming back to this aspect of the work; and this means something more than the trivial fascination with how much effort went into the works' production. There is an ethos of labour

continuously enacted in the practice; it matters that there are hours and days spent in arduous, technically demanding, and skilled forms of manufacture. The materials and methods of production that Kregar chooses mean that his whole project continually theatricalises itself as a particular type of studio endeavour. So, if "production thus not only creates an object for the subject", as Marx argues, "but also a subject for the object" [6], then what sort of subject and modes of subjectivity do Kregar's practice produce? Certainly a subject that is multiple, precarious, and disruptive.

Despite staunch declarations of the worker-artist's enduring significance made by Kregar's boiler-suited self-portraits in *I appear and disappear* (2004), their multiplication serves only to undermine them by either diminution and eventual disappearance, or by enlargement to an absurdly impractical scale. Kregar's team of orange clad assistants are advertisements for their own superfluity and status as quaint quotations, mantle-piece figurines (alongside dogs and sea captains) that nostalgically recall the old days when artists could more consistently believe in their role as blue collar workers standing outside the calculus of profits, surplus value, and transubstantiation of artistic labour into tradable commodities.

The surplus value at the heart of all this has its dark side, its uncanny, spectral after effects. How can a regime of production that *aims* for surplus rather than the product not produce what Sue Gardiner refers to as "object troubles"? As Žižek repeatedly argues, the inherent instability of capitalism, the reason it can never rest, is its insatiable appetite for surplus value. This appetite is the motive force for capitalism's "breathtaking dynamics of obsolescence", its constant production of mountains of waste. Trash, remainder, and excess, following Žižek's formulation, are material by-products of the theatre of Capital, and have their equivalence in the spectral excess that haunts the contemporary subject only able to establish itself through either suppressing, or negotiating a relationship with, this intractable excess. And it is identification, in various forms, with this excessive remainder that "introduces the mocking-comic mode of existence, the parodic process of the constant subversion of all firm symbolic identifications" [7]. In the capitalist age tragic seriousness is precarious; it becomes ever more strange and brittle the further it tries to get from the ridiculousness that haunts it, from its "'undignified', inherently comic" surplus. The pathos of tragedy is continually overtaken by the bathos of social carnival.

Hence the gnomes in Kregar's studio, tubby lords of misrule; overtly comic expressions of the artist's self-abasement in *I appear and disappear*. The gnomes exist in a large and a small series and are made from coloured glass that looks like deeply smoked jelly. There was to be a dominant giant gnome exhibited this year, but it cracked in the annealing process. They all carry tools and accoutrements that denote their mythic lives of working deep within Nordic mines and forests; picks, spades, brooms and logs that will suit them equally well in their contemporary role as guardians of local parks and gardens. The lore of gnomes, especially concerning their misplaced faith in the wisdom of humans, who took the

gnomes' knowledge of mining and metallurgy and used it to wreak havoc on their hidden worlds, contains a cautionary message about the irreversible and irrepressible duo of progress and greed. The most ridiculously sublime exponents of Capital's endless appetite and the mocking-comic spirit in Kregar's work to date are the ceramic piggy banks; fat little porkers, gaudy swine, that stretch out on the gallery floor just dying to be roasted, always ready for one more feast, one more coin in the slot; idle accumulators of unearned wealth.

While Kregar's herd of pigs has the same mood of spirited indiscipline as the break-dancing, party-animal pigs on the animated film *Shrek*, their restless multiplicity may signify a more subversive disturbance of the status-quo. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri appropriate the New Testament story of the Gerasene demoniac, whose 'legion' of spirits entered a herd of pigs, as an allegory of the multitude's power to defy logical comprehension and mastery: "What is so fearsome about the multitude is its indefinite number, at the same time many and one." [8] For Negri and Hardt, the multiple represents a ground level, world wide alternative to the monolithic system of global capitalism. Hardt and Negri's politicisation of multiplicity is part of a discussion that includes the crowd theory of Elias Canetti [9] and Michel Serres. Michel Serres claims that history, politics, and representation all rely on the imposition of unitary laws and concepts to subdue the clamour of the multiple. In words that chime with Kregar's often stated interest in the permanent liquidity of glass, and with his construction of large forms from busy collectivities of parts, Serres laments that, "We were afraid of gases and liquids, we understood nothing in Lucretius, our knowledge was not made for the great multiplicities." [10] Kregar wants to keep his project in the ambivalent heart of the multiple and let the One and the Many fight it out.

---

[1] Karl Marx in Steven Marcus, "Marx's Masterpiece at 150", *New York Times Book Review*, April 26, 1998, p 39

[2] Ibid

[3] Karl Marx in Christof Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: on the history of things and their perception of modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1993, p 57

[4] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, Verso, London, New York 2000, p 15

[5] Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom*, Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom*, F.W.J. von Schelling,, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1997, p 31

[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: war and democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York, Penguin Press 2004, p 151

[7] Žižek, 2000, pp 40, 43

[8] Hardt and Negri, p 140

[9] See Elias Canetti, trans. Carol Stewart, *Crowds and Power*, Gollancz, London 1962

[10] Michel Serres, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson, *Genesis*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1995, p 108