

Worker

By James Gilbert and Jennifer Vanderpool

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Though we live in a time of rapid technological transformation—the time of globalization; the time in which transportation and communication technologies are destroying the barriers of time and space at breakneck speed, collapsing the world in on itself and bringing us ever closer to the global village—there are still some things that have not and indeed cannot change, namely the structural function of the worker in this great machinery of expansion.²

The worker, the laborer, remains and must remain the source of all value, for nothing at all can be had or used and enjoyed of the great wealth that lies embedded in nature if some hand is not first guided by desire and necessity (if indeed these two may be distinguished) to reach out, grasp, and finally work up some portion of the earth for our use, first of all, and then for economic exchange. Cotton and wool, for example, some of the first materials of modern mass production, grist for the dark satanic mills of early European capitalism, still carry in them the cry of generations of field hands.

These hands belong to the worker, and through them the vital forces of labor flow into its objects of desire, attention and production. This is the difficult philosophical leap of modern economics that constitutes its essential humanism, for it credits the individual human, not this or that god, with the sole production of value. It is thus the beginning of a great awakening in collective experience, by which modern thinkers from Adam Smith to Karl Marx put common humanity first, above the transcendent—and in doing so gave immeasurable aid to all future underlings in the coming labor struggles that defined the modern world.

Move your hands from the clothes you wear to those massed on the walls of this installation—“Worker,” by James Gilbert and Jennifer Vanderpool. And now, as you move into the buzzing and throbbing interior space, push harder and touch the walls themselves: the forces you feel of warmth and of sanctuary are objectified psycho-physical energies.³ The worth of these clothes is nothing more nor less than objectified libidinal-economic energies—the workers’ vitality embodied in the object to which they gave, in some proportion, of their life.⁴ But the workers are not right here, at least not right now—in the machinic age of time-space compression their tendency is to disappear. Invisibility becomes their dominant characteristic. And in this sense our shared lifeworld becomes increasingly phantasmagoric, shot through in other words with powers that originate somewhere else.⁵ Ours is a haunted life, in the time of the absent presence.

Gilbert and Vanderpool have aided us well in the effort it takes to penetrate this phantasmagorical veil of modern alienation and directly experience—in other words, *to know*—the pain and the effort of conflict that workers transmogrify in the products of work. And in that they do homage, at least, and perhaps even redeem, in some small way, some portion of the debt we continuously accrue to the unseen men and women who spend lives in the mills making values we use and on which we depend in most intimate ways.

Yet this tendency toward the invisibility of work and of workers can never become a total blindness; it can never be complete because workers themselves are always conscious—not of everything, not of their entire predicament, but nevertheless of their relative suffering and exploitation, and hence they speak out, take matters into their own hands, get organized, and revolt. They push back against their masters, and in that they ensure that their products are always the product of conflict. The clothes on these walls, and which compound themselves in these figural sculptures, are the clothes of imperial struggle between labor and capital.

But *Worker* does more than help us see better—it advances the project of labor itself, for, from the perspective of the consciousness of labor, which is always struggling to understand its collective dilemma and thus to strengthen its position in the interminable conflict with accumulated capital, the unconscious universality of the workers' predicament is *the* revelation.

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² On time-space compression, see David Harvey, *The Postmodern Condition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 226; on the global village, see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Corte Madera: Gingko, 2003), 130.

³ Max Weber, "The Meaning of Discipline," *Economy and Society* Vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1156: in the modern, rational world embodied in the regime of factory discipline, "The psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines—in short, it is functionalized, and the individual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work procedure, he is attuned to a new rhythm through the functional specialization of muscles and through the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort."

⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 95.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 108: "Place has become phantasmogoric because the structures by means of which it is constituted are no longer locally organized. The local and the global, in other worlds, have become inextricably intertwined."