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**Exhibition Review: *DEMOCRACIA/ORDER***


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*DEMOCRACIA/ORDER*: Station Museum of Contemporary Art. Houston, Texas: April 27–August 18, 2019.

*DEMOCRACIA/ORDER* was a solo exhibition that took place earlier this year at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, Texas. It featured two series by the Spanish art collective DEMOCRACIA, formed by artists Iván López and Pablo España. The two artists have collaborated since 2006 and have consistently created projects that challenge the sociopolitical status quo. Their practice's hard-left approach aims to confront their audiences with uncomfortable topics such as the failure of democracy, social inequality, mindless consumerism, and the state as an apparatus of oppression, while pointing to our indolent complacency in regard to these issues.

One of the series in the exhibition included a three-part operatic film titled *ORDER* (2018), accompanied by an installation that presented photographs, video stills, placards, and other ephemera borrowed from the performances captured in each part of the film. *ORDER* was shown alongside works from the installation *We Protect You From Yourself* (2013–18). The exhibition sought to condemn contemporary capitalism, socioeconomic inequalities, and the failure of democratic politics.

The film was shown in a dark room separated by a curtain from the *We Protect You From Yourself* installation as well as from the other components of the *ORDER* installation. Before entering the screening area, viewers passed by the film's relics laid out on the floor of the exhibit space, or mounted in box frames on the museum's walls alongside film stills and photographic documentation. The curatorial choice to present the series in this sequence strengthened the film's impact—the exhibition's viewers had already been confronted with images and objects that they could revisit after watching *ORDER*. The film utilizes interventionist tactics to highlight the chasms between economic classes, whereas the series examining the image of riot police focuses on the state's repressive power. Displayed together, the two pointed to contemporary capitalist democracy as a dysfunctional, unjust system that favors dominant political, economic, and social classes. DEMOCRACIA's exhibition exposed the effects of social inequality and highlighted a division between “us” and “them”—us, the exploited and the agitated; and them, the complacent, the elite, and the state's agents of oppression. The exhibition aimed to reveal ubiquitous societal conflicts that we willfully

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neglect, as our opposition would be met with punishment by the ruling power. One part of the film, titled *Act II: Konsumentenchor (Choir of Consumers)*, depicts “us” as docile consumers accepting of those circumstances. The other two parts suggest that changing these social orders necessitates violence.

Each film showed an operatic performance acted out before an unsuspecting audience in both public and private spaces. The exhibition’s catalog explains that the performers in *ORDER*’s three parts were instructed by DEMOCRACIA to take their audiences, which appears unaware of its own participation, through a narrative demonstrating contemporary class division. The acts had titles: *Act I: Eat the Rich/Kill the Poor*; the aforementioned *Act II: Konsumentenchor (Choir of Consumers)*; and *Act III: Dinner at the Dorchester*. Their libretti were inspired by the ancient Greek poem by Hesiod, “Work and Days.” The poem, written in the eighth century BC, is an analysis of justice and a life of autonomous understanding, and is a work of ancient political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> DEMOCRACIA appropriated the premises of the poem and remodelled them into the operatic performances’ libretti. There are verses from the ancient poem that correlate to our present context such as “now is the time of the Iron Generation. What will now happen is that men will not even have a day or night free from toil and suffering.”<sup>2</sup> These lines inspired lyrics in *Act II: Konsumentenchor (Choir of Consumers)* such as “work like a slave, gorge like a goose” and “I declare the beginning of the Iron Age of survival.”

The first operatic section of the film, *Act I*, was shot in Houston. It depicts a young, white woman, dressed in a bejeweled gown, being driven in a black limousine. In large white letters written on one side of the limousine is the slogan “Eat the Rich,” and on the other side, “Kill the Poor.” In an operatic voice, the woman begins singing verses describing the virtues of work. Her voice is projected outside the car onto the streets of Houston through loudspeakers, so that pedestrians can hear the opera. In the meantime, the film shows armed members of the New Black Panther Party of Houston carrying placards with lines from a libretto that protests her opera. One member is seen holding up a sign that reads “Work is the blackmail of survival.” The art collective collaborated with the New Black Panthers to produce this film with the common goal of exposing those at the fringes of contemporary American society: the poor and people of color. The opera performer acts as a polarizing force—a representation of inherited wealth preaching from the safety of their limousine. The New Black Panthers’ photographic portraits holding the placards that brandished a selection of the libretto verses were also mounted on the museum’s walls, while the other ephemera were presented on the floor, strewn atop one other. This curatorial choice instilled a sense that the New Black Panthers physically occupied the exhibition space, as their vestiges continued to confront the show’s audience.

*Act II: Konsumentenchor (Choir of Consumers)* takes place at the Square Tallaght, a shopping mall located in a newly redeveloped suburb twelve kilometers outside Dublin, Ireland.

1. Robert C. Bartlett, “An Introduction to Hesiod’s *Work and Days*” in *Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 177.

2. “Hesiodic *Work and Days*,” Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University, August 6, 2018, <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5290> (lines 176–77).



IMAGE 1. Installation view of *DEMOCRACIA/ORDER* (2013–18) by DEMOCRACIA at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art; courtesy the artist, a/political, and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art; photograph by Michael Stravato © 2019.

The shopping center as a place of connecting with one’s community, and as a place of leisure, entertainment, and commerce, is a common fixture in Western suburbia. It is also a compelling symbol of contemporary consumerism. The video shows a group of children, seemingly belonging to a parish choir, enter the mall dressed in cassocks, and cut through the crowds of shoppers. When the children reach the mall’s mezzanine, they begin singing an operatic aria while their verses are displayed on a large screen that would be typically used for shopping advertisements, mounted above a customer service desk. Shoppers stand and watch confusedly—the high art of opera has a contrasting presence in the suburban mall. The unsuspecting audience’s strong Catholic tradition, perhaps, urges them to pay attention to the choir. The lyrics, projected in large white letters on a black background with a distinctly agitprop aesthetic, are secular and disturbing. Some read “grow your liver. You are only what you have, and your worth is what you buy.” The libretto aims to criticize the indolence of consumers. *DEMOCRACIA* attempted to convey that we all participate in “gorging like a goose” and “consuming all that we touch, even anti-consumerism,” showing just how resilient capitalism is—and how effective its cooperation mechanisms are. The result of our ineffectual stance is illustrated, and challenged, in the third part of the film, *Act III: Dinner at the Dorchester*.

The final act in *ORDER* features two opera singers in a private setting—a holiday dinner at the luxurious Dorchester Hotel in London, UK. The video begins with a group of elite, young, and mostly white individuals mingling at a lavish party. As with the public space interventions in the other acts, the revelers at this private party are unaware that the film recording is part of a scripted artistic intervention, and instead assume that the camera crew is there to document their gathering. In the meantime, the exhibit’s audience is introduced to



IMAGE 2. Installation view of *DEMOCRACIA/ORDER* (2013–18) by DEMOCRACIA at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art; courtesy the artist, a/political, and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art; photograph by Michael Stravato © 2019.

the opera's protagonist—a black woman who acts as the event's caterer, her actual role kept secret from the guests. The other opera performer, who collaborated with DEMOCRACIA for *Act III: Dinner at the Dorchester*, is the performance's antagonist—one of the party's attendees. Shortly after the guests sit to dine, the antagonist stands and begins to sing a libretto that exposes him as a ruthless purveyor of contemporary capitalism. The brutal lyrics aim to strip away the layers of elitist goodwill and symbolize the dominant class' de facto treatment of lower-class and disenfranchised citizens: "We've let them have a taste of welfare, and the more secure, more petty, and indolent they became" and "The crisis brings riches, there's a great business after a holocaust; with each catastrophe, a golden calf sheds fortunes left and right." The dinner's unwarned guests sit and listen. To their further dismay, the film's protagonist confronts her oppressor with a libretto that details her abject reality as a woman who is black and poor, catering to the white and rich. That interaction serves as a raw emblem of contemporary post-imperialism, illustrated in her lyrics: "You fling us into mere survival. Peace, justice, and dignity hang from the poplar trees like strange fruit." The lyrics refer to the 1937 poem by Abel Meeropol, and later the song (first performed by

Billie Holiday in 1939) “Strange Fruit,” which condemns racism and racial inequality in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Eighty years later, DEMOCRACIA shows that the verses of “Strange Fruit” still function as pertinent criticism of current racial and class divides.

A video still from the intervention hung as a large, framed photograph on the museum’s walls. The slogan “Don’t feel so safe. Do not think you are untouchable” was juxtaposed on an image of the dinner’s guests, seen chatting moments before the intervention. Derived from the protagonist’s libretto, the slogan was written in white block letters, typical of the typographical aesthetic of *ORDER*’s three acts. The protagonist’s verses in *Act III: Dinner at the Dorchester* do not bemoan her circumstances—they are a threat. She sings “A black swan stalks you on your way . . . We will be the executioners of your old world . . . Your children will erase from their name the rancid stench of your old pedigrees. . . . It is time to stop.” Her confrontation with her oppressors recalls the New Black Panthers’ rally from *Act I: Eat the Rich/Kill the Poor*, whose performance had the same intent: to retaliate against the ruling class while bearing arms and signs that read “We are not your slaves” and “We live to tread on kings.”

*ORDER*’s three parts are an evisceration of the injustices born out of capitalism and democracy’s failures. DEMOCRACIA’s interventions expose present social dynamics and point a finger at the contemporary elite in acts I and III, and at us, the complacent consumers in act II. Acts I and III offer a solution: a violent uprising, or a violent imagining of a revolution that might, but need not be, violent.

The film and installation were placed next to works from the series *We Protect You From Yourself*, consisting of a large-scale Carrara marble sculpture depicting a riot police officer holding a machine gun, and twenty-five photographs depicting the Spanish riot police. The portraits furthered the film’s message outlining the corruption of modern democracy, this time criticizing citizens’ inability to challenge the status quo. DEMOCRACIA produced *We Protect You From Yourself* inspired by public demonstrations that took place in Spain between 2011 and 2018. In May of 2011, citizens of Madrid organized a protest to object to Spain’s high unemployment and political corruption, urging the government to take immediate action. One of the tenets of contemporary democracy is the right to protest—and the freedom of speech. The protestors’ efforts were quickly silenced by the state’s riot police, who imposed order through threats of violent action, including physical harm and incarceration.

The museum walls displayed photographic documentation of the Spanish riot police during some of these rallies. The officers’ images, lacking in facial expressions, and some lacking identity due to their masked faces, rendered the people behind the uniforms as anonymous agents of a unified, effective, and frightening force. Stripped of their individuality, the riot police are symbolic of the state’s repressive power—a state that is built by, and caters to, the dominant social and economic classes. Both series explicitly convey disadvantaged citizens’ low social mobility, as *We Protect You From Yourself* also illustrates the impotence in protesting against the forces that place its citizens in losing positions. The exhibit

3. Maggie Ayre, “Strange Fruit: A protest song with enduring relevance,” BBC News, November 25, 2013, [bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-25034438](http://bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-25034438).





IMAGE 3. Installation view of *DEMOCRACIA/ORDER* (2013–18) by DEMOCRACIA at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art; courtesy the artist, a/political, and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art; photograph by Michael Stravato © 2019.

described these forces as the social elite who invest in building protective walls, rather than in bridging class gaps. This theme was exemplified by the sculpture in the exhibit. It depicted a riot police officer armed with a machine gun, and with his index finger pressed to his lips in a gesture of silence. The artwork, titled *Working Class* (2016), could be seen as a direct threat toward the viewer, or as an ironic commentary on contemporary democracy. If viewers felt the agitation of the New Black Panthers, or of the protagonist at the dinner party after witnessing the unjust chasms illustrated in *ORDER*, their desire to protest against the status quo could be met with violence from the state that will either harm or silence. This predicament suggests a sinister cycle where people are forced to accept their circumstances and assume the roles of the complacent consumers in *Act II: Konsumentenchor (Choir of Consumers)*.

One of the photographed members of the New Black Panthers holds a foreboding sign that reads “There is a violence that liberates and a violence that enslaves.” History has shown that when enough members of a disenfranchised group become agitated, violence can ensue. If the group is large enough, and determined to bring about change, it can catalyze a revolution. ■

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