

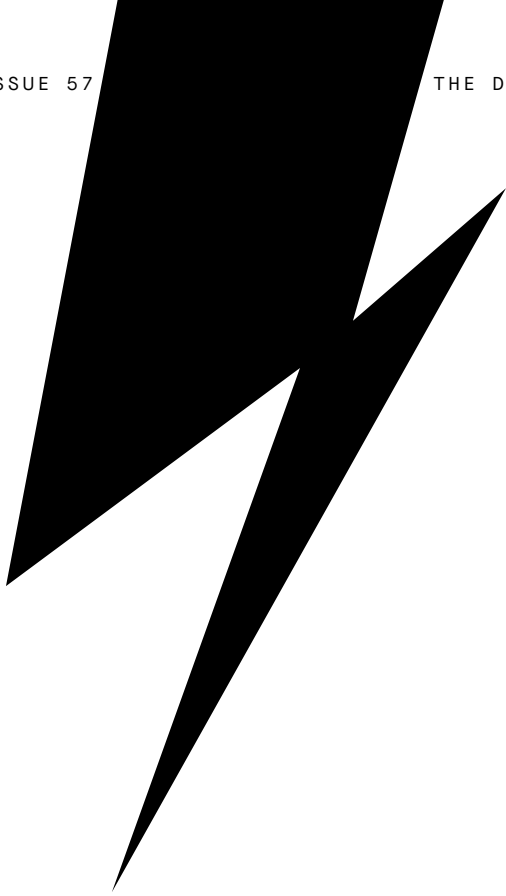


**Glasgow Glam  
Rock Dialogues**

***David Archibald  
& Carl Lavery***







In autumn 2016, David Archibald and Carl Lavery established the Glasgow Glam Rock Dialogues. The aim was to imagine a theatrical conceit for a series of performances in which they could approach pressing political and aesthetic issues.

Between August and October they wrote and performed three dialogues: *Work*, a response to the Universal Basic Income at Fika café, Partick; *Luxury*, which examined the historian Kristin Ross's concept of 'communal luxury' at Market Gallery in Dennistoun, and *Commune*, which responded to Peter Watkins's film *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* performed for Document Film Festival at the CCA, and once more at Glasgow School of Art to mark the launch of issue 56 of *The Drouth*. Below, in an attempt to understand what they've been up to, Carl and David dialogue about the dialogues, transforming the page into a stage.

**CL:** David, I'm sitting in my office now, thinking back on the Glasgow Glam Rock Dialogues and trying to unfold their significance for us. For me, they were a way of trying to stage thought, bringing pressing political and social issues into the public domain. I hope that doesn't sound too pretentious, but there is a real sense, I believe, that people tend to imagine thinking as a solitary exercise. Perhaps that even goes for any kind of creativity. It's time to bury these myths, to show that thinking is always a dialogue, something done in confederation with others. Our way of doing this was to perform thinking in public, both between ourselves and also between us – our words and gestures – and the audience. Maybe that's where theatre's relevance resides today: in its ability to show that thinking is inherently collective, a sort of 'generalised intellect', as Marx proposes in *Grundrisse*. So to clarify: I see the Glasgow Glam Rock Dialogues as little machines or devices for catalysing thought.

**DA:** Well, Carl, we've managed to get three of the dialogues under our glam rock belts in a little over three months. We started with words and images, and two of us on stage, moved into song and poetry in the second, with Kenneth Davidson supplying some still images as counterpoint, and by the time we were at the third it was full (or should that be fool) glam with mascara and feather boas, electric guitars and seventies glam music, a sixty minute montage of moving images, and a cast and crew of seven. It's all moved at a rather heady pace, which, ironically, given what you say about thinking, has given us little to for reflection. We've described it at various times as 'dialogic performance' or as a 'performance lecture', neither of which is fully adequate as the form has taken a more theatrical and filmic turn. What's been consistent throughout, however, has been this attempt to think in public, to interrogate contemporary concerns, informed by theoretical engagement and historical knowledge, about which we ourselves remain, in part, uncertain. It has been interesting to note that although we start from a broadly similar position on the political spectrum, we find ourselves disagreeing on a number of quite fundamental political issues. And we've tried to bring those conflicts into the public arena, to help

stimulate thinking about the subject in question. In that sense, it's not 'theoretical agitprop'. I'd balk at calling it theatre though. Neither of us will ever be asked to play The Dane.

**CL:** The idea of airing ideas and disagreement in the dialogue is a major part of our dramaturgy of thinking. There's no fall guy. This makes them the opposite of Plato's dialogues, in which every dialogic partner is simply a stooge, an instrument for Socrates to parade the full range of his intellect. In Plato what we effectively get is monologue masquerading as dialogue. Maybe that's the real reason why Plato was so avidly anti-theatrical – the stage would have exposed the impossibility of monologue and highlighted the need for publicness. In preparing and writing our dialogues we always insisted on the room for and importance of dissensus. The last thing we wanted was to resolve things or even to suggest, like Brecht, that there is a dialectical solution to the problems raised by the stage. The gap or *décalage* between our two positions is where the possibilities of thought – imaginative and critical – open up for the audience. In a culture and at a time when the collectively-informed society that Raymond Williams talked about in the essay 'Drama in a Dramatized Society' has almost disappeared, it is incumbent upon us to find alternative models for thinking collectively. Our refusal to come to any kind of synthesis in our dialogues was determined by that idea: to leave an empty space that could be filled by critical and creative thinking.

**DA:** In *Commune* we cite Brecht's comment that he didn't want the audience to, as he puts it, 'hang up their *brains* with their *hats* in the cloakroom'. That quote, for me at least, seems to get to something quite fundamental about his Epic Theatre. Yet, perhaps there's a contradiction between Brecht's desire for an intellectually-engaged audience and his didacticism. Brecht, at least in his more explicitly political work, wants the audience to leave the theatre thinking, but perhaps to be convinced that a Brechtian view of the world is the right one. We've refused that didactic approach. Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* challenges the perceived dichotomy between the active performer and the passive spectator, noting that the spectator 'observes, selects, compares, interprets.' So while there's certainly no

synthesis on stage, I do wonder, as you suggest, whether there is the possibility for synthesis, or syntheses, at the point of reception – that is amongst the audience. As I see it, though, that's not an essential component of what we do. Some of the ideas we've been discussing have been the subject of debate for decades, centuries, even millennia. I think we can add to the conversation without feeling the need to contribute the solution.

**CL:** Something else that we need to talk think about, David, and which is also a response to Rancière and to Brecht, is the onus we place on Glam Rock. For us, Glam Rock is a way of theatricalising Rancière's 'redistribution of the sensible', finding a method, in other words, to present ideas differently, so that one's standard approach to the world is displaced and destabilised. Glam Rock, as we know, lacked the political cachet of punk. Whereas punk was the original DIY, and cornered the market in homespun authenticity, Glam always appeared artificial, false, a world of feather boas, lipstick traces and glitter. The trashiness of Glam, its obvious theatrical fakery, presented itself to us as a possibility, an aesthetic ripe for re-appropriation. In the words of Guy Debord, we might say that we affected a *détournement* of Glam. The last thing one expects of Glam Rockers is to see them talking about Rosa Luxembourg, the Paris Commune and the split in the First International. Glam is generally seen as conservative, commercial, and uncool. I like to think that the gap between the oral and the visual, between the politics and the pop, also opened a space for thinking. In this respect two very different regimes of truth were allowed to collide with each other. Collisions produce energy, and this is what we were concerned with, too. Performance as a generator of thought.

**DA:** The starting point for our dialogues was a two-hander, *Our Literal Speed*, published in the journal, *October*. It discussed the knowledge economy and there was a line which suggested that the neo-liberal university would really only be happy with academic rock stars, or glam rock stars. We thought that a Debordian *détournement* of this nightmare could actually present some opportunities. In his essay, 'Popularity and Realism', Brecht discusses adopting and enriching forms which are intelligible to the

masses. Although Glam Rock may well have been sniffed at by some music critics, for both of us, certainly for me, it was an opportunity to return to a moment in my life almost before criticism. I'm not too concerned that Glam was considered conservative or uncool. In my pre-teenage years we didn't know what was cool. But we loved Slade, Wizard, and The Sweet. Retrospectively, it now seems that Glam was the best of times – Bowie and the New York Dolls – and the worst of times – Gary Glitter. Using Glam Rock allowed us to select the best – as in what we liked – of what was an extraordinarily broad genre and rework it politically. It also allowed us to get dressed up in leather trousers and sport feather boas. But it was important that we weren't presenting ourselves as some kind of cool-as-fuck rock stars and the notion of faded, middle-aged Glam Rockers trying to get the band back on the road seemed suitable. We also thought it could be a good laugh. For Walter Benjamin, as you know, Carl, laughter was a great catalyst for provoking thought. As he put it, 'spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances of thought than spasms of the soul.'

**CL:** Yes, you are right, David, humour was another tactic, a way of wrong footing the audience a little, and providing some breathing space for the ideas to percolate. There were a lot of laughs on the nights in the CCA and the Art School when we did *Commune*, especially when we stripped off the dressing gowns and got into the Glam kit. Additionally, we played around a lot with irony and allowing the audience to have a knowing relationship with the performance. Our intention here – and hopefully it worked – was to provide a welcoming space for thinking together. The last thing we wanted was to be seen as experts. That would have alienated people in a decidedly non-Brechtian way, and we would have simply been expounding ideas, as if in a lecture room. Disarming the audience through humour, sending ourselves up and looking ridiculous, although not always comfortable for us, was a kind of seduction, in a sense. We wanted people to feel at ease, and to be free to make their own minds up. I was always slightly startled by the things that people remembered from the performances – facts, ideas, and concepts that they perhaps hadn't come across before. I could, of course, be very wrong here, but I'd wager that people en-

joyed learning these things, and that the dialogues were not just limited to the stage, but rather seeped into the auditorium itself. The German theatre critic, Erika Fischer Lichte calls this sense of participation 'a feedback loop'.

**DA:** I wonder if some of the pleasure you mention, Carl, was connected to the specificities of place. We were keen that the dialogues were rooted in the city from which they emanated. So throughout the dialogues we reference significant events, individuals, and places connected to Glasgow – the UCS Work In, John Maclean, the MacLellan Galleries on Sauchiehall Street and so on. It perhaps provides the pleasure of familiarity – one of the most popular aspects of watching the STV detective series, *Taggart*, was the pleasure spectators could take in recognising parts of their own city on screen. It brings to mind the Alasdair Gray quote about how it's only possible to understand a city once it's been represented in art. But it was also a way of anchoring the theoretical and the historical in the local. The dialogues were, hopefully, not an abstract philosophical or political exercise. And, of course, it was the perfect locale for the genre we selected: is there a city as Glam or as Gallus as Glasgow?

**CL:** Probably not, is my answer, David. And as we know, Brian Connolly, the lead singer of The Sweet was born in Govanhill. Something else that we haven't really talked about is the aesthetic role played by other elements in the dialogues, elements that are not primarily linguistic. I'm thinking here of *Commune* and of Kenneth Davidson's extraordinary montage of images; of Simon Murray's light-touch directing style and his major dramaturgical intervention that placed a meta-theatrical frame around the performance, thus allowing us to perform as 'non-professional actors; of the performance artist MV Brown's amazing Glam make-up and her presence on stage; and, of course, Tim Barker's electric guitar that allowed us to end on a full-on Glam note as we belted out Johnny Thunders's classic 'You Can't Put Your Arm Around a Memory'. All of these things worked on a compositional and dramaturgical level to produce something that was more than a performance lecture but perhaps less than a dramatic play.

**DA:** Yes, by the time we got to the third dialogue it had become something of a team effort, with various artistic contributions, and also the support of Tony Sweeten, our Technical Supremo. This has enabled the dialogues to transition from the two of us speaking in front of some PowerPoint slides, with minor theatrical moments, to quite a complex audio-visual experience – something that is quite difficult to define in conventional terms. After the first rehearsal of *Commune*, Kenneth said that he'd never seen anything like it – and Kenneth's seen a lot. We weren't sure if it was a compliment but we were willing to embrace it. We've crammed a lot into three performances in three months. It's been useful to have a breather and to reflect more on what we've been doing. Today, more than ever, it's not enough merely to think. It's crucial to have spaces for thinking publically, for dissensus, for the airing of conflicting ideas, for listening, and, of course, for gesturing towards the possibility of action. As we say in the first dialogue, Carl, 'there's work to be done'...

## Glasgow Glam Rock Dialogues:

### One – Work

#### SLIDE 1: GLAM ROCK

**CL:** David, we've often talked about the need to restyle academic discourse. Yet at the same time to resist the temptation to dumb things down. What we wanted instead, what we were looking for, was a form of public thinking and speaking that embraced complexity and that wasn't afraid of experimenting with ideas and concepts. Perhaps a failed or middle-aged form of glam rock. You as Suzi Quatro; me as Marc Bolan.

**DA:** Yes, Carl. It's good to be here. Glamming and rocking. I believe we called it 'dialogic performance'. You can be Marc Bolan, but maybe I'd go for someone closer to home. Sweet's Brian Connolly – he was from Govanhill, you know. Nice shirt by the way.

**CL:** Thanks David. I bought the shirt in a retro shop on Great Western Road.

**DA:** Cool. I like it. I'm glad we accepted Johnny's generous invitation to speak about **the universal basic income**<sup>1</sup>, something that neither of us know much about in any detailed or administrative sense, but something that we are interested in and want to explore further.

**CL:** Perhaps the first question we want to address – it's the obvious place to start, after all – is with the name itself: **the universal basic income**. Immediately, the thing that strikes me here is the implicit distinction, the difference, between income and wage, the idea that you don't necessarily have to work or labour to receive money, to live.

**DA:** Yeah, **the universal basic income** is a timely and thought-provoking proposal.

Its timeliness lies in that it would represent a significant reform in an era of near-universal decline in the incomes of the majority of the working class (however that class is defined) on a global scale. It's intellectually provocative because, as you suggest, it invites reflection on the nature of labour and income, or work and wages. We might assume that the latter go hand-in-hand; but, there are widespread instances where work is unpaid – domestic work, caring for children, caring for the elderly – work overwhelmingly carried out by women for which they receive, on the whole, no wages. Rosa Luxembourgh contrasted the supposedly unproductive nature of domestic work with, as she put it, the music-hall dancer whose legs sweep profit into her employer's pocket.

**CL:** So wages are not tied to work, but to a specific type of work then?

**DA:** Yes, under capitalism, in the private sector at least, wages are paid to workers who, in classical Marxist terms, sell their capacity to work, or their labour power, to their employer. The Universal Basic Income represents a significant step forward in that it would guarantee that all who work – and even those who don't – would receive an income, or wage. But of even greater significance, perhaps, is that **it represents a fundamental challenge to the ideological prioritisation of labour which is conducted in the workplace.**

1 Text written in bold is spoken by both Carl and David.



**SLIDE 2:  
EQUIVALENCE**

**CL:** I totally agree with the point about ideological primacy – the fundamental importance – granted to the idea of labour. While I do want in any way to dismiss the sacrifices made by workers in building the world that we currently inhabit – how many died in road construction, for instance? – I am also excited by the removal of work as the prime ethico-political operator for a socialist praxis. It seems important to me that there is another way of valuing existence – what it means to be, for instance – that not only manages to transcend the idea of labour, but is actually opposed to it, in another more radical sense.

**DA:** The idea of work – or labour – is of fundamental importance to how the labour movement understands itself. It's all in a name.

**CL:** As I see it, Marx's law of value or general equivalence, the standard that measures labour time, is extremely useful for understanding how capital deprives the world of any intrinsic value or meaning by reducing everything to a logic of the same – by which I mean the law of exchange, the abstract circulation of money.

**DA:** Abstract? Would this be a good time to point out, Carl, that you still owe me a non-abstract tenner?

**CL:** Let's talk about that later, David. But to get back, while there is something radical in Marx's critique of general equivalence, the privileged position that is often granted to labour and economic productivity in socialist circles, can sometimes cause us to lose sight of the exciting possibilities that Marx's thinking opens up. What I'm concerned with, and this is a socialist as well as an ecological concern (if indeed the two can ever be properly separated), is how to safeguard those things and experiences that are priceless, and which the fetishisation of labour, for me, doesn't really manage to address.

**DA and CL:** The fetishisation of labour has contributed to the economic and ecological crisis which the world now faces.

**CL:** Perhaps today we need to think of a different vision of labour – one which has little in common with the ideas of capitalist modernity or even the Soviet model, but rather draws its sustenance from the heterogeneous figure of the human subject that Marx advances in *The Communist Manifesto (1848)*, when he imagines what a non-alienated existence might look like. Here Marx talks about how a person can lead multiple lives in a single day, and the idea of labour appears to have nothing to do with selling one's time on the job market. Rather, it is best seen as a type of work on self, a kind of pleasure, if you will. You experiment with different possibilities for living. I get pleasure from this shirt. It dates from around 1977 – come to think of it, isn't that the year you were born, David?

**SLIDE 3: SIDEBURNS**

**DA:** Flattery, Carl, as well you know, will get you everywhere, although my coming into being predates that of your shirt by a year or two. Maybe a little more. But the seventies is an exemplary period to illustrate how some of these points were played out in this city as it moved through a process of rapid de-industrialisation, and mass unemployment.

Alienation was the title of Jimmy Reid's 1972 inaugural Rectorial Address at the University of Glasgow, the august institution which pays both of our wages, or is that salaries?

**CL:** No doubt about that, we're fully paid up members of the salariat.

Reid makes a terrific speech. He is decked out in his white shirt, white bowtie and rectorial robes with these big seventies' sideburns. It's like Clydesidism's radical proletarian masculinity is just there. In Jimmy Reid's sideburns.

**CL:** They are total beltlers. Are you jealous?

**DA:** Don't be silly.

Reid defines alienation in terms of a more general malaise afflicting workers who are expendable objects to be utilized and cast aside. Of course, Reid had led the occupation of the Upper Clyde Shipyards in the period immediately preceding his election.

Reid worked in the Govan yard. The motto of Govan – *Nihil Sine Labore* – Nothing Without Work – is a motto which both capital and labour have both advocated.

What was notable about the occupation was that it was defined not as the withdrawal of labour – but as a work-in, that the workers controlled the shipyards and retained their operational status.

As such the UCS work-in built on the demand of the Right to Work, a demand which has long been at the heart of the labour movement.

Perhaps your critique, Carl, would be that demanding the Right to Work is really demanding to be exploited in the workplace?

**SLIDE 4: LAZINESS**

**CL:** As usual David, you have second-guessed me. I hope this doesn't sound too blasé at a time when so many people are finding it difficult to get jobs or have to work for a pittance, but my idea of alienation is a bit different. I think that labouring – and the word itself seems to echo this in the way that we use it in everyday life – is alienating in and by itself. What about the right to be lazy, for instance? Why do I have to work in the first place? I've always been baffled by this.

**DA:** In his address, Reid also posits that as social animals, human self-fulfilment is achieved through the contribution that men and women make, individually and collectively, to society. Work, or labour, for the common good, is central to that sense of self-fulfilment. So while you absolutely have the right to be lazy, and you have the right not to work – how you will feed yourself or pay for your cool retro shirts is a problem that won't create nocturnal turmoil for the bourgeoisie – perhaps the prospect of a lazy life is not as attractive as it might first appear.

**CL:** Agreed, I can see the argument here, and I do like those retro shirts. How else could we ever claim to be glam rockers, even failed ones if we couldn't get hold of the kit. And perhaps next time, David, I should wear those thigh-high silver boots I used to sport back in the day?

**DA:** I was tempted to dig out my old black leather trousers.

I think I could still get into them.

**CL:** But on a more serious note: I must beg to differ. Personally, I wonder – and this is borne out in reality by the anxiety that governments have about getting people back into work – if laziness might be the very thing that capital is terrified of. The thing that it needs to repress and expel. For if we all decided we were too lazy to work, where would surplus value come from? This is the very reason why I find the Universal Basic Income so interesting and potentially subversive: you don't have to work for it.

**DA:** I'm not so sure that Governments do stress about getting people back into work. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels describes the unemployed as the reserve army of labour. Marx argues that this metaphorical army is an essential component of capitalism, deployed in the systematic lowering of wages. But the central point about the right to be lazy is interesting. Conventional leftist thinking might posit that as capitalism cannot guarantee full employment then the right to work is a revolutionary demand. You could argue that Reid's and the labour movement's Protestant-like adulation of work is, dialectically, somewhat reactionary.

**DA and CL:** But you can't separate ideas from the material conditions in which they emerge.



#### **SLIDE 5: INFANTILE DISORDERS**

One person demanding the right to be lazy is perhaps an irrelevance, but if one million people demand the right to be lazy it becomes a revolutionary demand. But it's difficult to foresee the circumstances under which that idea would gain mass appeal. The right to be lazy will never be an idea whose time has come, to paraphrase Victor Hugo. Indeed, perhaps championing the right to be lazy is the worst propaganda that the advocates of the Universal Basic Income could adopt. It brings to mind Lenin's comment that ultra-leftism was an infantile disorder.

**CL:** Ouch

**DA:** Sorry, Carl.

Perhaps we should return to your earlier comments on Marx to find a more transitional approach that might help us propagate for the Universal Basic Income.

#### **SLIDE 6: COMMUNE**

**CL:** But good to get a bit of realism in there, David – it stops me from floating away on a sea of anarchist abstraction. I suppose I'm more interested in Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue who wrote a pamphlet *Le Droit a la Paresse* (*The Right to Laziness*) in 1880, when in exile in London. Lafargue had been a prominent figure in the Paris Commune of 1871, an event that offered a completely new way of thinking about what a communist future might – and one that broke with the idea of the State, and which Marx wrote about in the Civil War in France. Lafargue's pamphlet which was translated into numerous languages and which was second only to *The Communist Manifesto* in its popularity and reach at the time (sadly, it is now largely forgotten) contests the attempt of socialists in the wake of the Commune to present the worker as a good, hardworking citizen – a proto bourgeois subject, perhaps.

**DA:** What's the reason for Lafargue's hostility against the worker as upstanding citizen?

**CL:** It's both historical and theoretical. The right-wing press in France (and Europe) had tarnished the Communards as drunken maniacs, prostitutes, arsonists and opium addicts – a kind of rabble or lumpenproletariat on the rampage.

**DA and CL: All very Sauchiehall Street on a Saturday night.**

And so in reaction, those who regarded this as bad publicity for the revolution, wanted to portray the working classes as good, Christian people, salt of the earth.

**DA:** Presumably the idea of the eager, industrious worker was central to that portrayal?

**CL:** Absolutely. Lafargue, however, saw this as a reactive and dangerous move by his fellow socialists, for it repressed the essential point of all revolutionary thinking: the release from an economic system that can only ever be alienating and reductive on account of the levelling, inhuman logic of general equivalence. As opposed to this, Lafargue posits communal luxury, the idea that there is no other scarcity other than capitalist scarcity, scarcity that is endemically and purposefully produced. So laziness is not laziness as we might understand it: it's both realisation and refusal: an alternative, then, to capitalist alienation which the right to labour, to work, tends to perpetuate.

**DA:** absolutely perpetuates.

**CL:** One final point, if I may: perhaps Lenin's failure was to not be infantile enough – to remain, in other words, too conservative in his thinking, a way of approaching the world perhaps that might well have resulted in the logical coming into being of Joseph Stalin. To be properly dialectical means that the revolution needs poetry or laziness as much as poetry or laziness needs the revolution.

**DA:** Perhaps the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism should be the basis for a future Glasgow Glam Rock Dialogue, but that's work for another day.

'If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution' is a quote attributed to the Russian-born anarchist, Emma Goldman.

I think she'd like the idea of some lazy dancing.

It's a view far removed from the grotesque celebration of work in the Stakhanovite movement that emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. That's not a movement you, or Lafargue, or myself for that matter, would be queuing up to enroll in.

**CL:** I think we might have both been enrolled into some non-voluntary work programme in Siberia. What would have happened to those retro shirts then, David?

**DA:** The extreme fetishisation of work under Stalin highlights that how we understand work in what we might call the popular imaginary is not universal, and is always being worked through. The ancient Greeks regarded labour as a curse. Although it was convenient that manual labour was conducted by slaves and the elite was free to study warfare, commerce and the arts.

**SLIDE 7: ROBOTS**

**DA:** I raise that because perhaps we're on the cusp of a change in how we understand work, and the Universal Basic Income emerges in that context. Perhaps we're entering a post-work society, in the sense that the rise of automation and technology – where robots could fulfil the role played by slaves in classical antiquity – will leave vast swathes of the population with no work possibilities. That is desperate on the one hand – a future of mass unemployment beckons for many – but there's also the utopian possibility that this new technology could be harnessed to transform work.

Under capitalism the former is guaranteed. The need to think of alternative futures in, through, and beyond the capitalist model is more pressing than ever.

Carl, there's work to done.

**SLIDE 8: FUTURES**

**CL:** And maybe also work to be undone, and pleasure to be had.

**DA and CL:** For as we know the future is already here.

