



**Workbench, 2018**

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**Bill Balaskas** Lives and works in Nottingham and London

In the works created during his EIB residency, Bill Balaskas expands his exploration of utopianism and its limits – a central theme in both his artistic and academic research. By constantly oscillating between the present and the past, his three new works interrogate in different ways the project of the Enlightenment, and the relevance of its key principles of rationality, progress and social transformation to the current historical conjuncture.

In *Workbench*, Balaskas is inspired by the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx (1818–2018) and, in particular, by a catalytic event for his political awakening: the prohibition of gathering firewood in the forests surrounding his home city Trier. The Prussian government banned this activity and imposed harsh punishments, thus leading to many convictions for wood “theft”. Heinrich Marx – Karl’s father – had to deal with this problem on a regular basis as a lawyer, and in the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) Marx reveals that those “forest thefts” and the division of land property played a crucial role in his understanding of capital’s function and the formation of socio-economic classes. Notably, this was the main subject of a series of fiery articles that he wrote for the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842.



*Workbench* adopts as its point of departure the fact that Marx critiques in his writings not only the artificiality of law, but – most importantly – the ways in which the artificiality of power at large produces forged relationships between citizens, as well as between citizens and their natural environment. Prompted by Marx’s argumentation, the installation incorporates wood as a raw material, a production tool and a finished product in order to reflect on the manipulable “naturalness” of natural resources through their commodification. This condition is made explicit in the installation’s audio component, which features an AI (text-to-speech software) “reading” extracts from Marx’s *Rheinische Zeitung* articles. Finally, at a time when climate change threatens irreversibly the sustainability of the commons, it is inevitable to also consider the environmental dimension of the issues that encouraged Marx’s political “initiation” – people’s access to natural resources and the right to exploit them. However, in today’s case, even the potential democratisation of such access can no longer guarantee that this would remain unlimited, or that it would continue indefinitely.