

Maria Lind Soon

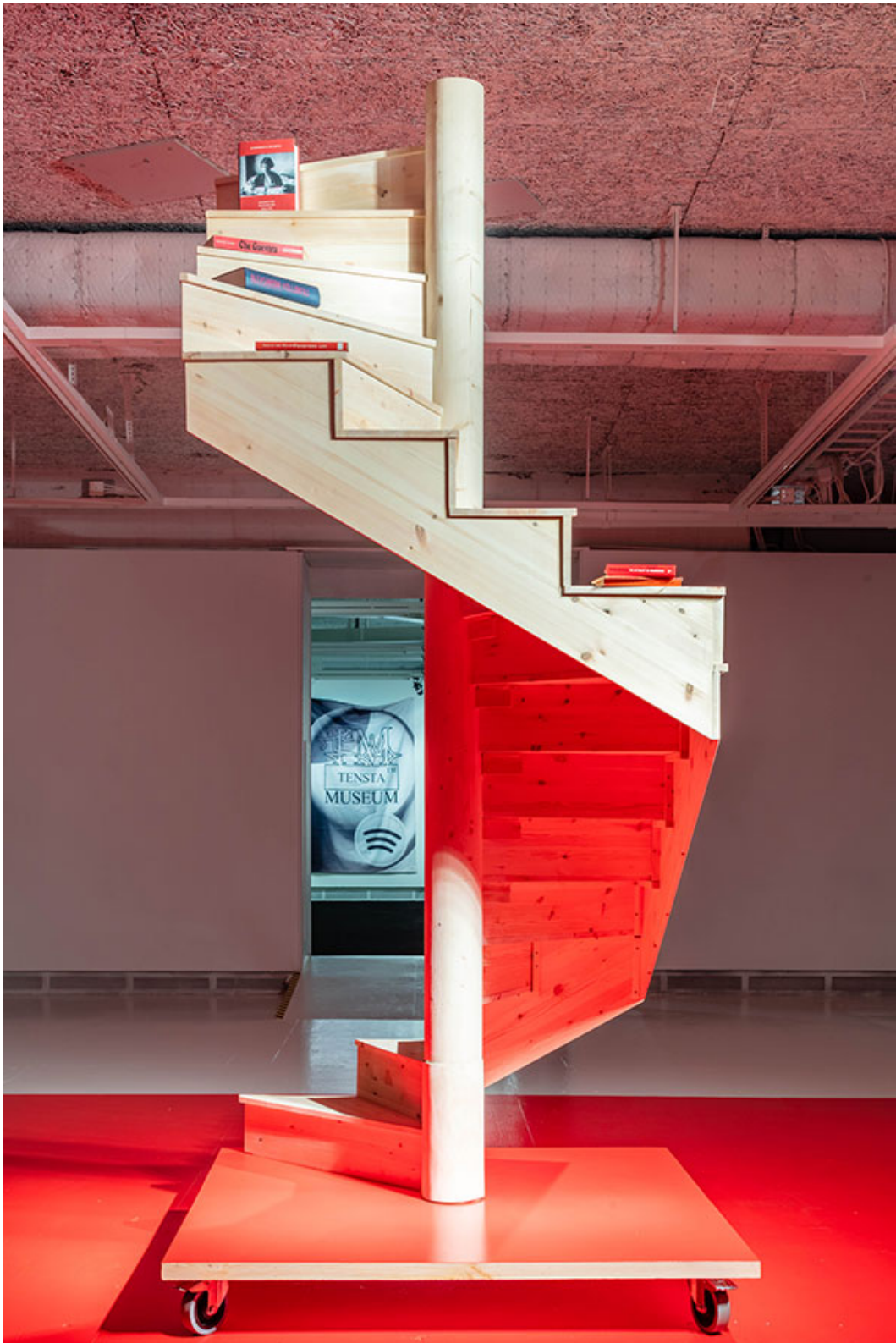
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In Alexandra Kollontai's 1922 essay "Soon (In 48 Years' Time)" people spend two hours a day working within their profession and the rest of their time can be devoted to their favorite pursuit.¹ They live among their own age group, as it suits them, and there is neither poverty nor wealth – money no longer exists. The world is one big confederation consisting of communes, with war having become a thing of the past. Kollontai's scenario is rich in Bolshevik alternatives to patriarchal Christmas traditions – for example, Santa Claus or Father Christmas are replaced by a "red grandmother" and a fir tree festival for sharing stories from the great years of the Revolution. All festival activities involve both women and men. Relationships seem totally equal – social struggles are long gone. Instead, as the story tells us – in 1970, forty-eight years after 1922 – it is nature that has become the enemy, creating the need for revolutionary forces.

"Soon (In 48 Years' Time)" foretells a future both attractive and frightening from today's perspective, and as full of contradictions as Kollontai's own life was. In her future, gender equality is accomplished, while generations want to stay apart. The old male authority figure is replaced by a new female one; anthropocentrism is unquestioned and nature must be conquered by humanity – all apparently within the boundaries of white heteronormativity. A passionate revolutionary who became a political refugee before serving as a dictator's diplomat, Kollontai had been born into a noble family. Nevertheless, she is interesting from today's perspective. Author, activist, migrant, politician, and ambassador Kollontai's radical proposition for transforming relationships between women and men not only influenced structural changes in Russia and the Soviet Union as well as the international labor and women's movements, but also articulated attitudes, lifestyles, and legislation that went far beyond these domains.² In fact, even my own life would look very different had I not encountered her work.

Free love and camaraderie were at the core of Kollontai's thinking, for her novels and essays describe love as a force that frees one from bourgeois notions of property.³ As an influential figure, a rare woman in the Bolshevik Party leadership, and commissar for social welfare in their first government, she not only set up free childcare centers and maternity houses, but also pushed through laws and regulations that greatly expanded the rights of women: divorce, abortion, and recognition for children born out of wedlock, for example. She organized women's congresses that were multiethnic in the way the young Soviet Union practiced controlled inclusion, following Western models. At the time, these were unique

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measures that were soon overhauled by Stalin, who did not appreciate any attempt at ending what Kollontai called “the universal servitude of woman.”

Kollontai was indeed a pioneer of political engagement and writing on sexual politics, at the same time as she fought for workers’ rights, advocating participatory forms of industrial organization. While leading a highly unconventional life for a woman of her generation, with two divorces and an active professional, sexual, and emotional life, she worked directly with women workers during the years leading up to the October Revolution. She was especially engaged in social and emotional emancipation from bourgeois family relations. After serving as a minister, she was seminal in the so-called Workers’ Opposition, criticizing the Party in the early 1920s for its remoteness from the workers and for having become too bureaucratic. That led to her being gradually sidelined from domestic politics and given a diplomatic post abroad – thanks to her previous experience as a political refugee in Germany, Switzerland, France, Sweden, and Norway, as well as her language skills. As the first female ambassador in the world, Kollontai served as the Soviet representative in Oslo and Mexico, more or less inventing “diplomacy through culture.” Eventually she was transferred to Stockholm, where she worked from 1930–45. Here she became a public figure, befriending many members of the feminist and predominantly lesbian Fogelstad group.

A different but no less engaged approach to love and feminism, received ideas, and inherited structures imbues the work of the artist Dora García. Sparks fly when the two meet, especially in García’s new work *Red Love* at Tensta konsthall, inspired by the life and work of Kollontai. Such sparks are desperately needed at this moment in time, though they have been needed since the days of Kollontai and even before. In most parts of the world and even among most groups of people, gender inequality has been dire for as long as one can remember. As we experience renewed struggles against the continuous re-entrenchment of patriarchal traditions, acknowledging predecessors feels crucial, just as crediting those around us who have unremittingly battled patriarchal and other oppressive powers.

García is a contemporary Sputnik – a fellow traveler whose approach to feminism and love takes dissidence, deviance, and marginality as guiding lights. These conditions were familiar to Kollontai, who lived and contended with normative tensions and contradictions. In one of the reading sessions organized by García, philosopher Oxana Timofeeva described how

Kollontai was subject to slut-shaming long before the advent of social media. García’s research-based practice is concerned with modes of political resilience and the production of subjectivity, which were also of key interest to an older generation of feminists. Psychoanalysis is a frequent sounding board in her work, specifically the theories of Jacques Lacan.

For García, Kollontai is a dissident figure whose biography and principles of action are an example of emancipatory politics. Like the philosopher Félix Guattari, the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, and artist and theorist Oscar Masotta, she is a deviant figure who has experienced marginality viscerally. Relating to them either through real or fictional characters, in *Red Love* García scripts interventions and installations that transpose these various authors into a wider public-facing presentation. Like a continuous inquiry, García’s work is invested in the performativity and utility of speech and action as political tools. Her approach to the exhibition space reflects the structural problems of this emancipatory process, frequently through performative devices that challenge the viewer.

Red Love consists of three distinct images operating as symbols. The first is a wooden cage-like structure with a door leading into a space furnished with chairs and a large table: a room of one’s own that can be imagined as Kollontai’s writing room and diplomatic office, if you wish, albeit not secluded. This stage-like space is used for various purposes during the exhibition, including by students from Stockholm art school Konstfack’s CuratorLab program and Tensta konsthall’s own separatist Women’s Café, where women from the neighborhood meet three times a week to work on textile handicrafts. Strong light emanates from a lamp suspended from the ceiling, casting distinct shadows on the floor, which has been painted white with a red square in the middle. This square is the second image: a shape which is not perfectly rectilinear, just as Kazimir Malevich’s angular utopian paintings are not perfectly even – a painting searching for a radically new reality, which becomes a podium for everything else.

The cage and the lighting bear resemblance to a scene in the legendary film *WR: Mysteries of the Organism*. Made in 1971 by Yugoslav director Dušan Makavejev, the film mixes documentary passages with fiction while dealing with communist politics and sexuality in the spirit of 1960s counterculture. Banned in Yugoslavia, the film follows the rebellious and politicized lead character Milena while she seduces a Soviet celebrity, framed by footage of people connected to the life and work of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, such as Jackie Curtis, the queer actor

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from Andy Warhol's entourage. Milena quotes Kollontai and her dictum that socialism without sexual liberation is meaningless. The expressionist play of light and shadow in García's room can also be found in Fritz Lang's first Hollywood production, *You Only Live Once* (1937), where a young Henry Fonda plays a criminal trying to get his life back on track. He is another outsider who society opposes, continuously falling back into crime regardless of how hard he tries to get out, ending up in jail and eventually paying with his life.

At the other end of Tensta konsthall's main exhibition space is the third image: a wooden spiral staircase carrying a selection of books. This atmospheric installation, rich in references, plays on the urgency, mission, and near-transcendental purpose of Kollontai's life and work. The stairs originate in a museum with a different and yet passionate mission, the Museum of Jurassic Technology, founded in 1988 in Los Angeles by David Hildebrand Wilson and Diana Drake Wilson. The museum is defined as "an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic," a term not further explained. In this exceptional, radically self-determined museum reminiscent of a cabinet of curiosities, many exhibits and artistic, ethnographic, scientific, and historical objects are unclassifiable. The collection includes a set of peculiar maquettes of wooden staircases, one of which came to be the staircase in *Red Love*.

Like Kollontai, García has also dedicated a certain amount of her work to love, in various ways and together with different people, searching for emotional and bodily relationships that reconfigure established hierarchies. Her 2009 performance *The Romeos* was designed to take place in the context of an art fair, but has also been staged at an art collector's party; this summer it will be performed in a whole city, Trondheim. The performance is set in contexts where kindness, charm, and good looks are professional tools, something that can be exchanged for something else. These features and abilities aid in the buying and selling of other desirable things. Posters with photos of the performers are distributed to inform the visitors that a group of young, good-looking men are present and being paid to be lovable, kind, and attractive. Their job for the evening is to make people feel special. The question posed by the performance is: Now that you know that these young men are paid to be nice to you, will you accept their kindness? Will it mean that the feelings you exchange with them are false, only because there is a financial transaction? Are you ready to accept their attention because, well, why not? As long as it lasts, it might be a fair

deal.

García's *Army of Love*, an ongoing collaboration with the writer Ingo Niermann, is about an army of people willing to give love – all-encompassing, sensual, familiar, comradely love – to those who do not receive enough of it. In short, people who have an excess of love share it with those wanting love but, for whatever reason – sickness, social marginality, handicap, age – are lacking it. Borrowing heavily from Kollontai and Charles Fourier, and referencing the notion that the ideal of love in the West is closely bound up with property, they pursue the idea of common love. Love should not be directed to only one person, but to everyone; as the great equalizer, love needs to happen between equals, and one makes people equal by loving them. In this regard, García and Niermann have actively researched the possibility of an army of love, a group of people with a certain code of conduct and the characteristics of an army, in the sense that the Christian Church has been compared to an army: selfless, collective, serving the common good, bound by duties of honor and companionship, each individual a part of a greater body. Mostly carried out as workshops with exercises and passionate debates on what the Army of Love should be, in this work those who receive plenty of love – and become equals – are sometimes ready to switch from receivers to givers.

Like both Kollontai herself and the Museum of Jurassic Technology, *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* and *Army of Love* exemplify how radical imagination can be set in motion. Here we also find a certain kind of dissidence, both heroic and unheroic, as well as failure and exile – all of the themes that reoccur in García's oeuvre and that we recognize from Kollontai. At a time when universal emancipation is again on the agenda, with intersectional approaches as powerful tools, it is an interesting moment to revisit Kollontai's conflicting legacy. How can we relate to, portray, and engage critically with this historical figure and her deeds today? What can we learn from Kollontai's political practice and personal life? Contrary to the idea that equality has been achieved, García argues that in reading Kollontai we learn that the fight must still be fought, and that change will not happen without love and affect, regardless of how exploitative they can be. Relentlessly imagining what comes next, we need to continue speculating and building futures. All the time. As Kollontai herself pointed out in "Soon (In 48 Years' Time)," some of our foundations will undoubtedly change – from kerosene lights, candles, and electricity, to a new system of reflected natural light, to life itself being sacred.

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All images unless otherwise noted are installation view from Red Love: Dora García (2018, Tensta Konsthall, Sweden). Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

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See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1922/soon.htm>.

2

Dora García's work *Red Love*, which draws from the life and work of Alexandra Kollontai, is on view at Tensta konsthall until September 23, 2018. For the academic year 2017–18, Konstfack's CuratorLab and Tensta konsthall engaged in a collaborative research project on the life and work of Kollontai. The research project acted as a springboard for García's new work, using reading sessions as a major tool. Each of the four reading sessions hosted guests who brought suggested readings and made presentations, including: the writer Agneta Pleijel; the medical doctor, writer, and activist Shabane Barot; artist Petra Bauer with researcher and critic Rebecka Thor; political philosopher Michael Hardt; writer and philosopher Oxana Timofeeva from the collective Chto Delat?; Aaron Schuster; García herself; and the initiators, i.e., the head of CuratorLab Joanna Warsza, researcher Michele Masucci, and myself, the director of Tensta konsthall.

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Among Kollontai's most read texts are "The New Woman" (1913), "Make Way for Winged Eros" (1923), and "The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman" (1926), as well as the short novels *Vasilisa Malygina* (1923) and *Red Love* (1927). The latter is a psychological study of sexual relations in the early Soviet period, which has given García's exhibition its title. *Vasilisa Malygina* was published in English together with the short stories "Three Generations" and "Sisters" under the title *Love of Worker Bees*, which was widely read in the West throughout the 1960s and '70s. "Make Way for Winged Eros" was written as a response to many letters she received from young workers with questions on how to conduct life under socialism. She describes how historically different material conditions have determined and regulated love and sexual relations in society. While "The New Woman" deals with the psychological aspects of an emancipated working woman who belongs to no one but herself and yet is a member of community based on trust and solidarity, "The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman" is an account of her own experience. The three stories in *Love of Worker Bees*, written in unadorned prose with proletarian readers in mind, give examples of the tensions between old ideals and new sexual lifestyles after the Revolution, as well as the power of solidarity between women.