

## AFTERWARDS

Notes on an installation by Gabriela Golder

By Erik Bullof

1. The procedure of the reenactment has become very common in the field of contemporary art. Reenacting a situation from the past, reconstituting an event, allows for shedding new light on our history through the introduction of a critical distance or through parody or, even, exploring its powers according to a process of re-describing, in which documents and testimonies create new scripts. However, what happens if one tries to actualize something that has irreversibly disappeared? How can we give an account of something that no longer has a place, that has been erased? How to tell of that which has been extinguished? This is, without a doubt, the core of Gabriela Golder's work, *Reocupación (Re-occupation)*, in which she proposes to her models, unemployed people (who were electricians, lathe operators, mechanics, train operators, drivers), to reproduce the gesture of their work before the camera. Paraphrasing Marker and Resnais, we could say that a worker dies when the living gaze that rests upon her or him has disappeared.

2. In one of his studies dedicated to the relationship between literature and cinema, the Russian writer and formalist Víktor Shklovski compares Chaplin's acting with the passing of photograms in the camera. The actor, he says, models his acting on the intermittencies of the images through a series of discontinuous movements, separated by points, akin to a jerking movement.<sup>1</sup> The body becomes a machine. Chaplin never stopped exploring the dramatic resources of this mechanical tension, trapped between purpose and dance. Likewise, the worker leaning over his assembly line, adjusting screws in *Modern Times*, produced in 1936, ends up going crazy, prisoner to a frenetic dance. In those same years, Rudolf Laban, the inventor of choreographic notation, developed a system of analysis of movement based on the study of workers doing their jobs, with the aim of defining a new gestural economy. But, now that work has disappeared, what is

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1 Víktor Shklovski, *Literature and Cinema*, trans. Irina Masinovsky, Dalkey Archive Press, 2008, 2008.

the finality of the gesture in the moment of its reenactment? Is it perhaps a simple footprint, the sign of an absence, a possible reactivation, a promise?

3. For a long time, the critique of work, of a Marxist inspiration, stigmatizing the reification of the worker under the form of alienation, appeared as the device for our emancipation. We must remember the slogan of Guy Debord, written in chalk on the Rue de Seine, in Paris in 1953, "Never Work", taken up again during the events of May, 1968, which recalls the proposals of Paul Lafargue in his *The Right to be Lazy*, to denounce the madness that was claimed by the working class to demand its right to work. Today, work is disappearing or is transforming to the point that its critique seems beaten by a kind of unreality. The term "alienation" belongs to a more discrete employment, as if the absence of term in our usage somehow mitigates its reality, like a negation.

4. In the five screens of the installation *Reocupación* (2006-2010), almost exclusively male workers (only one woman worker appears) are filmed in a frontal manner in front of a white background as they vigorously describe in detail their past activity, its object and its modalities. Each one talks of the conditions of being fired after massive privatizations. The large majority of the testimonies have to do with the Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), the oil company, as well as the railway company, Ferrocarriles Argentinos, both privatized in 1992 during the presidential administration of Carlos Menem. Others, less numerous, talk about being fired for political reasons and involvement in unions during the military dictatorship. All of them make a point of the horror caused by the announcement of their being fired, in most cases after decades of working for the same company. It is striking to observe to what extent the military dictatorship and neoliberalism have inflicted the same wounds, as if they were two sides of the same coin. Little will be spelled out for us in this tales of suffering in the field of work. We can discover it in the methodical description of the tasks, like the bus driver who enumerates the list of his duties (following the time schedule, opening doors, selling tickets, giving change, driving, confirming delays, supervising the position of the passengers in the bus to not cause them to get shaken up, not braking suddenly), reciting his litany of objects (a change purse, a paperweight for the tickets), along with other modest trophies to present to the camera.

Far from being a manifest critique of work, the stories become more like the death sentence that is represented by the loss of employment. Life seems to have been stopped, suspended, like a frozen gear. What future will it have when there is no work? Not just in the individual sense, in the economic and psychological fields, but also in a collective sense. What will happen after the disappearance of public services? The speeches by the workers, filmed by Gabriela Golder, are very articulated; they translate commitment and political culture, linked to public service. Work has been the condition of possibility of a collective identity. Today it is the object of a duel and it reveals a post-traumatic upheaval whose suffering tries to be healed by speech.

5. Beyond the painful and precise tales, with their emotions still hot, about work and their loss, the return of the unions, and survival, the gestures given to the camera are witnesses to the recording of memory, almost anthropological, directly in the body. The curve of a back, the turn given by an arm, the trembling that expresses the footprint of an activity that does not survive more than by its imaginary outline. At the mercy of an irregular gymnastics, slowly or quickly, between mime and dance, the game of stretching and flexing their arms, legs, the nape of their neck or the pelvis draws an abstract diagram that translates custom, attention and the balance between body and machine. However, while the work is done as a means to an end (offering a service, increasing production, fixing a machine), the gesture that we see here is liberated from its end, means without end, to take up once again Agamben's expression.<sup>2</sup> A gesture without end, more than the exhibition of an absence.

6. Without a doubt, the end of work in our developed societies is linked to the place that is occupied by the machine. Nevertheless, the layoffs evoked in *Reocupación* are less so about the technological transformations (that are brought up in some cases) than they are about the pure economic decisions imposed by force in the name of profit, which destroys lives and struggles. Neoliberal logic does not stop accelerating this cycle of collapse and obsolescence that orders each one of us to transform ourselves in search of an increase in performance. How, therefore, to avert the loss and disappearance if not through acts of memory, lists and inventories? In this sense, *Reocupación* evokes a myriad of discrete, subtle and almost imperceptible disappearances: a technical

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2 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture", in *Means without End*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 48-59.

expertise, a game between the body and the machine while the latter becomes antiquated and one must compensate its disrepair with adjustments that are almost like band-aids, a shouting down the tracks, an old ticket dispenser, the ra-ta-ta-ta of a pneumatic drill, signals emitted between workers to communicate and create the time for exchange in a community.

7. The occupation of factories by workers has been one of the preferred means of action in the labor struggle, whether we are talking about actions that occurred in France in 1936 or in Argentina in 1964. The term "occupation" today experiences a great semantic displacement whose ambivalence was revealed by the artist Hito Steyerl, between distraction, the service economy, therapy, and other activities poorly paid, on one hand, and the conquest, colonization, capturing, repression of autonomy, and even resistance, on the other.<sup>3</sup> The semantic transformation of the term "occupation" has a relationship with that of work upon translating the dialectical inversion of values between alienation and identity. However, what does a reoccupation mean? It is no longer about returning to places of work to appropriate the tools of production, nor is it about returning to put the machines into operation, or taking up work again after an interruption. It is about reactivating a paradoxical absence, in the threshold of social exclusion, of retirement, halfway down the road between survival and unemployment. Without a doubt, the reoccupation concerns, above all else, the mechanism of the installation: the dissemination of five screens in a space, the wandering of the spectator, a plurality of shared points of view among the personal stories, the mnemonic gestures and the long still gazes turned towards the camera. If the cinema has been the place of a dialectic relationship between the gesture and work, the body and the word, *Reocupación* presents, for its part, the loose pieces of a langunary group, formed by the forgotten footprints and gestures, lost details and promises, inventory of scattered fragments whose possibilities we must reinvent.

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3 Hito Steyerl, "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life", in *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2012, p. 102-120.