

***Labour in a Single Shot***  
**Harun Farocki/Antje Ehmman**  
Florian Hoof<sup>1</sup>

*Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit – Labour in a Single Shot* – Video installation in Museum Folkwang (Essen, Germany), August 16<sup>th</sup> to September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014.  
Project Webpage: <http://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net>

*Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit – Labour in a Single Shot* is the last exhibition Harun Farocki curated together with Antje Ehmman before he passed away in July 2014. It was part of the *Ruhr Triennale*, an annual festival that takes place in former industrial production sites situated in the *Ruhr* area. The *Ruhr Triennale* is the result of extensive political efforts to cope with the breakdown of the industrial production in this region by trying to turn it into a hub for service and creative industries. So, being his last exhibition in Essen, the steel capital of the former industrial heartland of Germany and now a region battered by unemployment, it is a kind of programmatic and at the same time contradictory end to Farocki's work. The exhibition is surrounded by a city that faces bankruptcy and is currently under forced administration because of the financial deficit situation. It is taking place in a museum that was rebuilt with a 55 million euro donation from the Krupp Foundation, the owner of the Thyssen-Krupp Steel Company. This is as contradictory as it gets.

The exhibition shows the results of the long-term project *Labour in a Single Shot* that Antje Ehmman and Harun Farocki started in 2011. This extensive project, a co-production of *Goethe Institute Boston* and *Harun Farocki Filmproduktion*, consisted of a series of workshops that took place in fifteen cities on four continents including Bangalore, Hangzhou, Cairo, Rio de Janeiro, Boston, Lisbon, Berlin and Moscow. In these workshops amateur filmmakers were prepared “to produce videos of 1 to 2 minutes, framed in a single shot. The camera might be static, panning or travelling – only cuts are not allowed” (Ehmman/Farocki 2014). The exhibition has to be understood as a kind of a visual excerpt of the some 400 films produced in the context of this project.

The video installation on display in Essen is divided into two parts. The first part shows ten films from the Lumière-remakes project *Workers leaving their Work Place in 15 Cities*. Similar to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies, 60323 Frankfurt, Germany.

Lumière film *La Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon* shot in 1895, the films rely on a static camera position that is placed in front of factory gates or automated exit gates of service industry facilities. The examples range from white-collar employees leaving their offices in a Tel Aviv research facility to blue-collar workers in Bangalore entitled “Workers leaving the textile factory”.

Similar to the situation at the factory gate, the visitors are forced to pass this installation. Harun Farocki mentioned to me that there were significant problems in getting permission for filming in factories. Consequently, the films that were finally shot relied on factory owners that somehow had a positive attitude towards the project, but there were few of them. So while the workers leave the factories, the visitors seem to break the golden rule of “no admittance” (Marx 1962, 189) and enter the second part of the exhibition to finally see “the secret of profit making” (Marx 1962, 189). When the visitors have entered the exhibition gate, there is one single room that is filled with screens that show a compilation of six films from ten selected cities of the project network. One of the selection criteria for this exhibition seems to have been the exclusion of western European cities such as Berlin or Lisbon. The videos on display are quite diverse. They show “labour: paid and unpaid, material and immaterial, rich in tradition or altogether new” (Ehmann/Farocki 2014). Video titles such as “The Office”, “Wool Quilt for IKEA”, “Demolishing Site”, “The interesting shovel”, “Nimble Fingers”, “Wait-Work” or “Boring-Machine” are paradigmatic for the heterogeneous character of the project. A coherent aesthetic framework is guaranteed by the strict formal specifications of the video material and the implicit standardization through identical screen interfaces.

At first glance this whole project seems like a labour-centered mock-up of Albert Khan’s project *Archives de la planète* where Khan tried to build up an iconographic memory of societies, environments and lifestyles by filming them all over the world. Due to the strict formal approach of *Labour in a Single Shot* one might also be reminded of Konrad Lorenz and his *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica*. This project consisted of so-called *Bewegungspräparate* (movement preparations), short films that are between a few seconds and up to two minutes long. Their purpose was to show the *essence* of a specific movement or behavior. Instead of segmenting the movements in a physiological manner, Lorenz argued that the overall ‘Gestalt’ has to be taken into account. The project *Labour in a Single Shot* seems to point in a similar direction. Despite the visual standardization of the videos by restricting their length and by excluding editing, the videos offer quite different approaches as to how to play with these formal constraints. These small but significant aesthetic interventions make it difficult to perceive the videos as documentary footage in a *direct cinema* sense that finally shows the ‘truth’ at the workbenches and sweatshops of globalized capitalism. Rather, work is transformed into

an aesthetic experience. However, labour is depicted neither as a dangerous and dirty form of exploitation nor as a clean, precise and abstract one. The videos show normal situations that, exactly because of their almost calm and unexcited atmosphere, can trigger quite disturbing viewing experiences. Moreover, some of the videos seem like filmic ideal types that display the characteristics of specific work situations such as “wait-work” and their classification as “transport” or “eye-work”. This approach bears some resemblance to early classification systems of work movements. In the 1910s Frank Bunker Gilbreth relied on film-based motion studies to identify eighteen work patterns such as “find”, “search”, “delay” or “transport” (Hoof 2015) to rationalize factory work.



Image 1: *Gilbreth Method of Packing Soap: Original Films of Frank B. Gilbreth*, 1910-1924. Prelinger Collection, Library of Congress (public domain).



Image 2: *Soap packaging 2*, Dir. Ignacio Masllorens, Argentina, 2013, 1 min 57secs. <http://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net> (accessed 12/11/2014).

© Ignacio Masllorens

But there are more similarities between *Labour in a Single Shot* and the industrial film tradition. In the 1910s, when the contemporary regime of mass production was still in its infancy, one of the most iconic examples of workplace rationalization was the “packing soap studies”. Interestingly, *Labour in a Single Shot* also provides videos from 2013 named “Soap packaging” and “Soap packaging 2” that were shot in Buenos Aires. It seems that certain labour movements are specifically appealing to film and thus can be characterized as “filmic objects” (Kracauer 1997). At the same time it shows that specific work patterns do not disappear and are still essential for economic production systems. In this sense the project is also a visual statement against claims such as Daniel Bell’s idea of a *post-industrial society* (Bell 1973). *Labour in a Single Shot* shows the contradictory spheres of contemporary globalized capitalism where plain dirty labour is placed discretely besides highly specialized forms of knowledge work. Although quite different, both are still part of a system that relies on the cultural technique of ‘gates’ to regulate access and to control labour.

All of the 400-odd films produced during the project are also available through a database that is accessible via the webpage [www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net](http://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net). The database can be searched not only by ordinary keywords such as “factory work”, “night work” or “food” but also by colors such as “light brown”, “pink” or “silver”. This enables fascinating navigation paths through the sphere of labour, including the workbenches of the global economy as well as the service industry and the realm of scarce work where people basically struggle to survive on a daily basis. Or to put it differently: the exhibition also poses the question as to why one might watch these videos in an exhibition space such as a museum or an art gallery. In a sense this exhibition can also be seen as an exploration into the possibilities for moving images between relocating film in institutions such as museums or art galleries and the options offered by the logics of relational database storage systems.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bell, Daniel. 1973. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ehmann, Antje, and Harun Farocki. 2014. “Concept.” *Labour In A Single Shot: Project Webpage*. <http://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net/en/project/concept/>
- Hoof, Florian. 2015. *Engel der Effizienz. Eine Mediengeschichte der Unternehmensberatung*. Konstanz: Konstanz University Press.

Kracauer, Siegfried. 1997. *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Marx, Karl. 1962. *Kapital I, MEW 23*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag.