

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ANTJE EHMANN AND HARUN FAROCKI'S GLOBAL VIDEO PROJECT

EDITED BY

ROY GRUNDMANN
PETER J.SCHWARTZ
GREGORY H.WILLIAMS

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Labour in a Single Shot

Critical Perspectives on Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki's Global Video Project

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10. Punching In/Punching Out: Labour, Care, and Leisure at Work and at Play

Jeannie Simms

Abstract

The representation of labour and workers is considered in relation to the Labour project by Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki and their workshop participants in several countries, and in the work of contemporary visual moving-image artists. Different methods of production and aesthetic choices are analyzed, particularly in relation to ideas of objectivity and observation versus creative invention when artists collaborate with workers and mix observation with extensive workshopping and theatrical staging for the camera. Simms focuses on various significant geopolitical sites and situations, including the Chinese-Laotian border, undocumented Guatemalan day labourers in San Francisco, a maid-training agency in Indonesia, and textile workers in the garment district in Manhattan.

Keywords: labour, collaboration, performance, migration, artwork, imagination

In Harun Farocki's films, the bottom line always seems to be bodies and souls – a concern for human subjects, whose lives are shadowed by the subsuming drives of corporations, the military, and state and corporate media. Farocki traces how ideology and policy meet the skin and minds of people. He exposes institutions' infringements on democracy and how the moving images used by them often calcify into power through the top-down dissemination of histories. His rigorously researched essay films on subjects such as labour, the military, surveillance, consumerism, and the law provide methods for long-form visual correctives. The films are truth-seeking and analytical, and they draw from real situations and show people at work. By

shedding light on the lives, emotions, and conditions of ordinary workers and people, as well as on the conditions that shape their experiences and emotions, the films offer artists and independent moving-image makers tools for our time, as we careen further into the era of "fake news" and "alternative facts." Writing from the perspective of a fellow artist, I will reflect on forms of social imagination and on the ways the Labour in a Single Shot project, as well as the work of other independent artists and moving-image makers, challenges the ideologies and strategies of institutions of power while also raising questions about the interior lives of workers.

The subject of labour's invisibility is part of Farocki's life's work. His 1995 essay film *Workers Leaving the Factory* asserts that, while work was one of the earliest subjects of film, there was a general disinterest in imaging the factory during the first hundred years of cinema. Through voice-over and archival footage from newsreels, a Soviet film, and occasional narrative films depicting work conflicts (strikes, as well as industrial film imagery of gates and barriers that protect the factory), the film makes a strong case that the history of narrative cinema has largely excluded stories that come from within the factory walls. This void serves as a summons for more films to be made – and Farocki takes up the subject of labour in many of his works. The Labour in a Single Shot videos further answer the call while also actively training a new generation of moving-image makers to focus on the subject of labour through the workshops.

The Labour videos show us aspects of human life that we do not often see: people just doing their jobs. Because work is often performed in the service of employers and is not entirely driven by choice, it is hard not to wonder what people think about their work and how they relate to what they are doing, to other workers, and to their companies or employers. To what degree do workers imagine and enact the values, interests, and desires of their employers? Farocki's own films likewise focus on the social, cultural, and economic values embedded in work and the workplace. They seem to suggest that the workplace is as good a site as any for revealing the core beliefs of our societies, beliefs that are both imagined and embodied.

Farocki's films have shown how companies and workers negotiate deals with one another or learn to sell products or themselves, and how they manage other workers or manage themselves. He focuses on the logic of the workplace in such films as *The Interview* (1997), *Retraining* (1994), or *Nothing Ventured* (2004). Farocki's selections suggest that the worker's imagination is borrowed in the service and interests of the employer. Footage of verbal exchanges explores professional language and the specialized terminology workers have learned to use with fluency. The terminology further reveals

the values that are important to employers and which must be performed through speech acts by employees.

The acts of observation and witnessing in Labour in a Single Shot function as tools to emphasize real time, time that passes at the pace of thinking, breathing, moving, and feeling, as in our own lived social relations and experiences. The psychology and value of productivity in my selection of Labour videos materializes through the bodies and mouths of the workers, through attitude and emotion, raising questions about care and concern. Who cares for whom? Whose cares are addressed? In this essay, I explore the motivations and imagination of the labourers, and I discuss contemporary moving-image artists who produce artworks with workers. These contemporary artists utilize tools of real-time observation, voice-over or intertitles, and work experimentally, workshopping and creating artworks with workers. Some of the non-Labour art-makers I discuss rely on the emotional bonds of trust and affection that already exist between coworkers as useful assets for creative collaboration. These bonds pose deeper questions about how work and the rest of life connect and challenge structures of profit. The artists' visual aesthetic choices resist neat categories of value. At the same time, complex dynamics between work, care, and camaraderie undoubtedly do emerge.

In her book Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography, Ariella Azoulay makes a case against "political" versus "aesthetic" categorizations of photographs and exposes the fallacy of these concepts when positioned in opposition to one another. In her discussion, Azoulay describes imagination as "'perverse' or 'pathological' when the range of possibilities that it generates appears to us to be threatening, strange or depressing. Most of the time, however, the points of friction created by the imagination are subsumed within existing economies of exchange without our even being aware of their imagined status." For example, Farocki's film In Comparison (2009) observes different forms of brick production in various cultures, some by hand, some highly industrialized, revealing different values concerning time, efficiency, and the social structures and values that bricks quite literally hold in the built structures and worlds they form. Another example, Farocki's War at a Distance (2003), shows the ways computer-generated images were increasingly used in the reporting on the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991, inaugurating a movement towards expanded simulation and away from human observation and handheld cameras. Showing how constructed

¹ Ariella Azoulay, Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography (London: Verso, 2012), 4.

simulations stand in for reality or reflecting on how something as simple as a brick structure can suggest cultural priorities "without our even being aware of their imagined status," as Azoulay describes, Farocki's films point out various subtextual ideologies at play in society.

The Labour in a Single Shot videos show what might be hidden in work environments and how different kinds of labour situations might challenge the very possibility of filming in such contexts. It seems noteworthy that the project emerged in the era of the "crisis in journalism," in other words, between the decline of broadcast news and television, the proliferation of cable TV, and the rise of the internet. It also developed during a period of decline in foreign news coverage in the United States, a rise in webbased, user-generated content, and the expansion of mobile journalism and bystander eyewitness video. It seems to address another absence as well: unscripted real-time documentation of everyday life from parts of the world not generally imaged by corporate media in the United States and much of the West.

The workers in the Labour in a Single Shot videos I discuss perform low-wage, expendable labour, alone or in loose networks that appear to have little organizing ability or established bargaining power. They may work at home, or they might operate in transitional or temporary situations not united under one roof. The videos barely scratch the surface of the vast field of human activity falling under the label of "work." Yet they afford viewers rare glimpses into rooms and situations that show how people spend large swaths of time. The videos open our eyes to the lives of people one might never otherwise see, showing how they connect to global economic powers. They allow us to wonder how these workers' jobs are integrated with their private lives, emotions, and psychic states. How does an artist make visible the invisible, or the unimagined? The hands that create, make beds, care for bodies, pour foundations, and harvest or butcher our food remain hidden. Lives and labour remain mysterious, by design. As Farocki's final project, produced together with Ehmann, Labour in a Single Shot incorporates the philosophy and methodology of the late film-maker, curator, author, and educator to recast work, workers, workshops, and the world.

In what follows, I will discuss a handful of moving-image artists who create videos that move beyond Farocki's observational and essayistic methods to expose the inner lives of workers. I will consider his impact on another generation of artists and discuss how they have developed his tools into new forms of moving-image art that build upon his example. The Labour project uses strategies connected to early cinema as well as what Jennifer Peterson, writing about contemporary film-makers and

moving-image artists who utilize historic tools in the digital age, calls "conceptual realism." Peterson argues: "By challenging the commercially saturated, fast-paced style of the moment, these films enable us to witness labour and media reflecting on and even shaping each other. At stake in this work is a rigorous, digitally informed observational aesthetic that adheres to a principle of witnessing." Aesthetically, these works connect to realist and neorealist films in which nonprofessional actors perform in stories about difficult economic conditions and social struggles, in which the "stars" on the screen perform the struggles of their own real lives. In the case of the artists she cites, they insert constructed or staged situations into ordinary environments, and most of them use the actual people in the films to create poetic and metaphorical gestures in real time, avoiding contemporary tools of illusion or heavy digital manipulations.

Often shot with a handheld and moving camera that underscores the human presence of the cameraperson/observer, the Labour videos suggest the potentially tenuous position of the observer whose own frail circumstances are pointed to by the instability of the situations depicted. It is hard not to wonder how the film-maker obtained access to what often appear to be precarious situations. I have selected videos that, in my viewing experience, create a productive anxiety. They transmit the stress of workers dealing with high-stakes and unpredictable work environments: nannies and day labourers who, with limited language skills, interpret tasks and expectations across vast cultural differences. As an artist, I am struck by the observational nature of Ehmann and Farocki's project and the wide range of content and approaches within their relatively simple rules for the project, as well as by the range of participant shooters from diverse backgrounds. The drive to bring the background to the fore in the workshop videos materializes in a similar way to the artists' videos I will discuss. As we move towards the increasingly obfuscating imagery and language that currently surrounds the consequences of globalization, forced migration, and the very nature of work, artists such as Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson, Patty Chang and David Kelley, and myself pursue and orchestrate projects that, like many videos in the Labour project, allow us to observe the processes behind the global economy writ large. There is a simple elegance in the Labour in a

² See Jennifer Peterson, "Workers Leaving the Factory: Witnessing Industry in the Digital Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, ed. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 600.

³ Peterson, "Workers Leaving the Factory," 600. Peterson discusses artists such as Sharon Lockhart, Ben Russell, Véréna Paravel and J. Sniadecki, Harun Farocki, and Daniel Eisenberg.

Single Shot strategy, which allows the participants to reveal the workers' viewpoints through their own hands and eyes.

The labourers in the Labour videos are often shot from close by, and we do not usually see a reaction to the film-maker but assume that the subject knows they are there. It is certainly worth asking what the various workers in the videos might have known or felt about the person behind the camera observing them, including their sense of the camera operator's level of interest or sympathy. At any rate, it is difficult to grasp much about the relationship between those filming and those being filmed. Yet, culturally, we understand being filmed as a matter of being subjected to attention and scrutiny, suggestive of heightened importance. It affords an opportunity to observe oneself being observed and to provide the distance required to understand oneself through the attention of another.

What, if anything, can be gleaned from these videos of the underlying emotional situations and stakes for the workers in the work they are doing and in the locations where they are doing it? That the films allow us to ask this question is an important opportunity, given the relatively invisible nature of some forms of work. Viewers can observe people performing paid tasks that they might otherwise never see: hat-making, massage, and phone sex, for example. Information is palpably present in the looks, gestures, and body language of the people in the videos. The diversity in the collection of works from numerous geographic locations allows for comparative relationships or differences to be found. What are the many ways people relate to their work – whether physical or intellectual labour? Does work create social continuity and connections across generations, family, regions, or other groups? Or might the work be primarily a means to an end, in which money earned represents larger goals, opportunities, cures, spiritual connection, or means of survival - or any combination of these things? What forms of global capital or other forces flow through the bodies of workers? To what degree are bodies disciplined by economic hierarchies? The films I discuss below show the specificity of place and the transient nature of mostly low-paying or low-skilled work. We see bodies performing physical work, yet, as viewers, we also summon what is not easily known and likely project our own relationships to work or what we might know about the various contexts depicted.

In what way do our attitudes about our own work – or opinions and judgements about other forms of labour – affect our reading of these films and what we see as we watch? One might look for vestiges of satisfaction, pleasure, or effectiveness, or for signs of boredom, struggle, frustration, and subversion in the gestures of the workers. The Labour in a Single Shot

films raise some of these questions, and I will compare them with works by contemporary artists who go further to reveal more personal aspects of the workers' lives or the larger circumstances surrounding the workplace. All of the films discussed will help paint a fuller picture of what people spend their days doing and of how this might impact their quality of life, cares, and concerns.

Labour in a Single Shot Videos

In the Labour video *Nanny*, produced by Do Tuong Linh in the 2013 Hanoi workshop,⁴ a woman takes care of two babies and a young child. As with other videos in the project, the camerawork is simple and shaky, but the feeling is one of transparency, of being able to see the physical labour, the facial expressions of the worker, and the strain she experiences. This, in turn, raises questions about her inner experience – as if we were close enough to know her, because we know what she does. Yet there is a wide gulf between subjects and viewers in terms of all that cannot be immediately seen or understood.

Paola Baretto's *Baba*, made in 2012 during the Rio de Janeiro workshop,⁵ records a nanny comforting a child in a playground. A woman who takes care of the child is employed by the parent of the child, who thus become the woman's manager. She may or may not also be managed by an agency that pays her, if she is not paid directly by the employer. This film depicts a complex labour situation and raises a number of questions. The nanny watches as the child glides down a playground slide and then reacts hurriedly when the child suddenly breaks out into loud tears (off-screen) due to an apparent accident. As a society, are we to consider as equal the concerns of the upset child and their parents on the one hand, and the nanny's concerns about her own standing as an employee, particularly if she is held responsible for the apparent accident, on the other? How might these possible feelings of fear and concern compete with one another? One might feel both a desire to comfort the child and resent that the child causes a workplace "hazard" and a challenge. Is the nanny concerned about what observers might think of her work performance - or of her darker skin colour in relation to the child's pale skin? The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated in 2010 that there were 43,628,000 domestic workers worldwide - a substantial

- 4 https://vimeo.com/76333132.
- 5 https://vimeo.com/57094668.



Labour in a Single Shot. Tran Xuan Quang, Hat, Hanoi, 2013.

proportion of the global economy, with the majority in Latin America and Asia. This work by large numbers of people caring for young, sick, and ageing populations is increasingly performed by unprotected noncitizens or by people with residency rights that are not as robust as citizen rights. This often creates power dynamics between the caregiver and "client" (as evidenced in various abuse stories in the news), but we must also ask: how does this precarity impact the lives of the workers, their own care network, and their own access to healthcare resources?

In the case of Tran Xuang Quang's *Hat*, also shot in Vietnam in 2013, ⁶ three generations of people stitch hats together while sitting on the floor. When we see that a child is present, we realize that there is a convergence of labour forms, meaning that childcare or care labour is also part of the hat-making production process in this home. We see a woman glance up from her work and over to the child sitting next to her, in what we might imagine as a look from one form of work to another – from the work of stitching a hat to that of caring for the young child. Is she checking the well-being of the needle-wielding child, to make sure that she is safe, attentive, and not growing restless? To what degree is the woman's care for the child impacted by her concerns for productivity, given that she may be the child's supervisor? Perhaps the adults are keeping the child busy, so that they themselves can remain productive.



Labour in a Single Shot. Tran Xuan Quang, Hat, Hanoi, 2013.

While it is a purely subjective projection, at this moment in the film, I imagined a special kind of trauma born from the banal aspects of work, a sense of pointless repetition or an anxious sensation that the work will never end, a feeling that one must try to continue, against the feeling of grief for lost time. An alternate reality might be to see the child and adults playing together instead of working, yet there is no indication that this is what is going on. Although there appears to be a playful environment amongst the workers, there is pain in seeing the child labouring, wasting precious youth on work, though I know my opinion is influenced by living in the United States, where young children are protected by labour laws. We cannot tell from the image alone if the child is also developing fine-motor manipulative skills for physical dexterity or gaining a sense of curiosity and kinship from the shared activity, in what is likely a family situation. In Mary, shot by Sandra Calvo and Pedro Antoranz during the Mexico City workshop in 2014,⁷ a phone-sex worker in Mexico City instructs another worker on how to speak to a customer. In Chu Kim Duc's Massage, from Hanoi in 2013,8 we see images of three people giving a massage. And in Streape, shot by Karin Idelson during the Buenos Aires workshop in 2013,9 strippers perform in a setting tightly framed by the film-maker. All three of these Labour videos raise questions about the direct collision of emotional

- 7 https://vimeo.com/96486166.
- 8 https://vimeo.com/76336524.
- 9 https://vimeo.com/67086491.

labour and leisure time. In these videos, workers expend efforts to channel physical pleasures associated with recreation and relaxation directly to their temporary employers or clients. We understand this work to be as repetitive as the work in *Hat*, with possibly similar or greater forms of physical fatigue and mental tedium for the labourers.

Both the repetitive nature of the labour in some of the videos and the use of the long, single take settle viewers into real time, provoking us to wonder what the subjects might be thinking and feeling. Mary begins with a woman explaining to someone off-screen how to simulate, using a lollipop, the sounds of oral sex for clients, and what lines should be delivered. "Remember, the client is always delicious, always tasty, always huge" is the last line of the video, suggesting the routine and mechanical responses required for the job. She carefully outlines the importance of maintaining an illusion for the client and the exact skills required to do so. In this gesture she demonstrates command over her own performance and a brief glimpse into her own relationship to her work. Mary, and the other Labour videos mentioned above, were filmed with little camera movement and, of course, no cuts, allowing viewers to observe one person or a small group of people. The Labour in a Single Shot website lists statistics for Mexico: service and commercial work comprised 78.3 per cent of employment (by sectors) in 2012, and almost 60 per cent of the population performed informal work in a cash economy.¹⁰ The project website includes economic and labour statistics for each city where workshops and filming took place; and instead of voice-over or essayistic writing, particular data sets are presented on each city's page. There is no information provided on the website's Concept page about the data or how it relates to the films, but visitors can glean a sense of economic context for the people encountered in the videos.11 Moving images are used in tandem with facts to teach viewers more broadly about the cities and the workers who inhabit them.

Other Moving-Image Works

Prior to developing Labour in a Single Shot, Farocki often built a case in his films with written and visual evidence that moved towards a thesis, such as in *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988) or *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995). This pedagogical premise also took form in

¹⁰ https://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net/en/workshops-until-2014/mexico-city/.

¹¹ Website accessed January 20, 2020.

his years as an educator at UC Berkeley and at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. The Labour project united film-making and teaching methods in the instructional workshops that Farocki and Ehmann led for the artists, film-makers, and authors who created the short videos. Keeping Ehmann and Farocki's project of observation and education in mind, I want to turn to contemporary artists who work in film and on topics of workers and physical labour. The artists discussed below answer the call of *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) to fill a representational void by making videos about work, particularly physical forms of work. Directly and indirectly influenced by Farocki's oeuvre, they take up labour as their subject matter and make work or workers visible. The six artists utilize filmic observation, but also, importantly, engage in direct intervention to tease out social, economic, and political relations surrounding the labourers depicted, thereby exploring the shifting shape of work and the emotional lives of workers in a globalized economy.

The fact that, like Farocki, each of these artists has an art-teaching practice informs how we can read their work. Particularly with the two collaborative teams Strom and Carlson and Chang and Kelly, the aesthetic choices can be read, and should be understood, as related to a pedagogical ethos, where the process of art-making is one in which subjects learn about each other in new ways and share that with a wider audience, thus producing new forms of knowledge together. The artist Emma Hedditch, also discussed, uses a different approach by making connections between archival footage and video she shot herself of garment workers in 2014. The artists work without the prescriptive codes of traditional narrative fiction and the expectations those codes vest in viewers. Their films combine a range of aesthetic tools that come from varied disciplines including documentary, journalism, anthropology, video art, essay films, and performance art. Most of the subjects are directly connected to well-publicized political situations or large labour trends, such as migrant labour. These artists use related techniques, yet they go further in stimulating the imagination and inner life of the worker by adding creative collaboration that often shows workers "off duty." They also call attention to the workers' broader geopolitical and economic circumstances, raising questions about how those conditions shape not just the workers' lives, but also their beliefs, attitudes, and emotions.

Strom and Carlson work with the pre-existing familiarity and trust workers have with one another to build a different form of collaboration. In these video artworks, workers are not shown labouring at their jobs as in the Labour in a Single Shot films, but instead collaborating in various performances that connect with their work or workplace. They are shown



Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson, *Four Parallel Lines*, 2007, video, colour, 5 min. Reproduced by kind permission of the artists.

both at work and away from their jobs; sometimes, the artworks showcase their personal memories and fantasies. For instance, *Four Parallel Lines* (2007), a video installation by Strom and Carlson, was made with Guatemalan migrant day labourers in the Bay Area. The men walk in sync, dragging planks of wood in the sand of a beach, making four parallel lines along the shore. As the tides flow, the lines are washed away.

Cuenta (2007) is another short video made by Strom and Carlson with the same Guatemalan day labourers. The performers move through different forms of speech and song in the piece. The video does not depict the men actually working. Rather, the familiarity they have with one another as workers is put to use to create a synchronized chorus of songs and sounds that they perform for the camera. One man starts by saying:

Yesterday I went to look for work and thank God I was able to find work. Today I also went to look and here we are with our friends. The day before yesterday I also went and I stopped to drink some coffee \dots ¹²

The day labourers in *Cuenta* have worked together as well as killed time looking for work together. Coming from Guatemala, they likely shared forms



Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson, *Cuenta*, 2007, single-channel video, colour, 2 min. 30 sec. Reproduced by kind permission of the artists.

of communal struggle and ways of coping in their past lives with violent surroundings as well as in their current experiences of looking for work in tenuous and vulnerable locations and conditions as undocumented workers.

Strom and Carlson worked with the men over a few weeks and got to know them. The men's experiences of working together on jobs and the emotional bonds forged in struggle, camaraderie, support, and interdependency were redirected by Strom and Carlson into the making of Cuenta. In the video, the men are depicted sitting close together and harmoniously speaking, singing, and creating sound, fully in sync and musically punctuating each other. Rapid calls and shouts are made when they are picked up at the start of a work day by employers driving by in trucks. Working with the artists, they transformed those sounds into a score and an experimental vocalization. These activities are a different kind of work – they are a type of creative production, for which Strom and Carlson paid them. The collaborative creative process allows Strom, Carlson, and the men to delicately interconnect the violent history of Guatemala, day-to-day survival activities, personal memories, and their emotional longing across politically contested borders. The compensation the men received from the film-makers satisfied their need for survival while the final artwork they produced evokes the imaginative internal manoeuvring required to navigate their daily lives.



Patty Chang and David Kelley, *Route 3*, 2011, 3-channel video installation, 25 min. Reproduced by kind permission of the artists.

The movement of a large object and the care work of washing hair form the basis of Patty Chang and David Kelley's video art installation Route 3, whose title refers to a new international road in Laos, built in part by the Chinese government. The installation is comprised of a three-channel video made by Chang and Kelley in Laos in 2011. It is a non-narrative piece combining aspects of essay films and experimental documentary with poetic visual metaphors, and shows several different sites and activities. One striking scene in the video depicts Laotian workers (hired by Chang and Kelly) from the town of New Boten moving an invented sculptural object created by the artists around the old town of Boten (from where the workers had been displaced).¹³ The piece depicts the ambiguous and possibly pointless labour of moving around a rectangular, body-height rail structure with curtains that keep viewers from seeing what is inside. It also shows people eating a meal on work break, women having their hair washed at a beauty salon, and a young man dancing on roller skates at high speed through the streets - all images in which the pressures of labour are momentarily absent.

Route 3 is set within the context of the construction and geopolitics of the new international road in Laos, and it follows the various people affected by its construction. According to the artists, the road is divided into three parts: the Thai government paid for the part closest to Thailand, the middle part was funded by the Asian Development Bank, and China paid for the part closest to China. Brand-new Chinese casinos were built

in the northern Lao border town Boten, and Chinese workers inside those casinos have introduced a new, enhanced service economy on the new road. The town of New Boten was created for the Lao people displaced by the casino industry. *Route 3* also shows a cafeteria for the Chinese workers from the casinos, which were built for Chinese tourists (because gambling is illegal across the border in China), a scene that demonstrates the ethnic changes and divisions of these new economic sites. Route 3 cuts back and forth between the two towns and includes scenes from a hair salon, editing together the faces of the people doing the washing and of those getting their hair washed. This footage provides a deeper look into the larger social and economic dynamics at play. Communal hair washing, often in a river, is a common social activity in Laos, whereas the hair salons represent the introduction of modern equipment for people with more disposable income who can afford those services. Substantial changes have already begun in Laos with increased tourism, multinational entertainment, and a service-based economy, as Route 3 expands trade throughout Asia. Given the rapid change and movement of entire communities – and the segregated economic communities of the Laotian and Chinese people – how might these politics play into the feelings of the people whose bodies touch one another in the hair salon on the new road? Do the salons become places of support, information-sharing, and comfort, or places of resentment and anxiety about changing ethnic and class structures?

There is one final image in *Route 3* of a Fujianese migrant worker freely and vigorously moving through space on wheels. The skater is unencumbered by geography, the routines of work, or the limited wages and confines of the dormitory living quarters the new service economy provides him. His movement looks joyful and thrilling, as he is fully ensconced in the pleasures of his own graceful athleticism. We observe this casino worker momentarily freed from the tensions of work or local politics. The smooth expanse of the new road is here a skating surface, metaphorically ripe with potential for a limitless future.

We have seen how film and video make visible the invisible, the way documentary is never without a perspective, and the way artists, both "professional" and "amateur," are interested in showing bodies at work. In *A Pattern* (2014), Emma Hedditch shows bodies at work by mixing imagery shot in the 1970s by a film-maker named Irving Schneider, sourced from the internet, specifically YouTube, combined with footage Hedditch shot in the chaotic streets of Manhattan's Garment District in 2014. In this neighbourhood, which is also known as the Fashion District of New York, there is a specific timetable during the day when workers roll clothing or



Patty Chang and David Kelley, *Route 3*, 2011, 3-channel video installation, 25 min. Reproduced by kind permission of the artists.

bolts of fabric through the streets. They roll the fabric to the production shops where clothes are made, to show samples – and then roll the racks back again full of finished garments. There is a large storage space near the intersection of 38th Street and 8th Avenue where these samples come from. By 4:00 pm, things wind down, and on the weekend this garment traffic does not exist at all. Hedditch spent the summer of 2014 looking around the Garment District and shooting. In A Pattern, she presents a continuum of work extending across four decades. We see the same sort of labour performed in the 1970s and again nearly forty years later. The city itself becomes part of the factory floor, as materials are taken through the streets and sidewalks. It is surprising to see both the difference in the built environment in New York City between the 1970s and 2014, and the similarities in the form of manual labour taking place. If anything, the work has likely become harder, with greater time pressures driven by globalization and technology. The visibility of Schneider's footage on YouTube afforded Hedditch the opportunity to create a relationship between past and present, and we can say that the internet affords Labour in a Single Shot similar possibilities.

As an artist, I myself have worked with issues of labour, care, and migration, including in several projects in collaboration with communities that often go unnoticed by wealthy, globe-trotting Westerners and those from the Global North. While on a fellowship at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, I observed the highly visible queer and trans community among the large number of domestic workers in Hong Kong who were from the



Emma Hedditch, A Pattern, 2014, SD video, colour, 33 min. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

Philippines and Indonesia. As debates about same-sex marriage raged in the United States (a goal that U.S. progressives thought would strengthen the nation's social fabric), I was struck by this alternative phenomenon at the intersection of homosocial migrant labour, homosexuality, and the matrices of work, sexuality, and community. The second part of the project was made in Indonesia, where I observed the training process for migrant domestic workers moving from Java, Indonesia to Taiwan. I produced several short videos in the series Readymaids: Indonesia, created collaboratively in 2009 with women inside a maid-training agency in Java before they were placed with families in Taiwan. We created videos in extended voluntary workshops over a few weeks based on the fantasies or memories of the women who wrote them. With my background as a college professor, I employed many of the pedagogical methods I use in my classroom, and showed the women artworks to help generate ideas and facilitate discussion about how to collaboratively brainstorm and invent creative works. As in the Labour workshops, the women inside the agency reflected on the nature of work and created videos containing long or single takes, but they sometimes also chose personal memories or fantasies they wished to share, planning and directing how these would be



Jeannie Simms, I'm the only one that hasn't flown yet, 2009, digital video, colour, 5 min. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

staged for the camera. Perhaps *Readymaids: Indonesia* is another example of a form of art video that reinscribes subaltern imagination with social agency. Foley sound added in postproduction augments the videos in an attempt to visualize and make audible the interior wishes of these maids-in-training.

At the maid-training agency, women constantly go to and from training as they get placed in homes in Taiwan and their migration paperwork is finalized. One of the eldest maids-in-training at the agency, Supriatin, chose to participate in the workshops and made a video called *I'm the* only one that hasn't flown yet, based on her fantasy of becoming invisible, so that she could leave the agency and go visit her family. (Leaving for leisure is only sparingly allowed, for fear that the agency's investment in workers will be lost if the trainees do not return.) Supriatin's quest for the power of invisibility points to her life under constant surveillance, where anonymity and escaping the bosses' view are desirable luxuries. In this instance, visibility is not desired, because it would expose personal desires and activities *outside* of the world that directly benefits the employer. Younger women are in higher demand and are the first to be placed abroad. Supriatin had been waiting almost a full year in the agency to be situated with a family and was growing bored and frustrated, and she missed her own family. She had said goodbye to many of her friends who had left for Taiwan. In the video, she visits her husband (played by a female dormitory staff member) and her daughter (played by a much younger fellow trainee) after concocting a scheme with her fellow trainees to help cover for her in



Jeannie Simms, I'm the only one that hasn't flown yet, 2009, digital video, colour, 5 min. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

her absence. At the end of the video, Supriatin successfully returns to the agency after seeing her loved ones and re-enters unscathed and without reprisal, because she is assisted by her fellow trainees, who keep a look-out as she passes a sleeping guard: the fellow trainees have got her back. The trust and camaraderie of the women, built through their life and work in the training centre, re-emerges in the fantasy as they act out protecting one another. Although I was not able to observe evidence of the effects that the work produced after I left the country, it seems worth mentioning the possibility that this form of fantasy and performance might nurture the women's friendships, trust, and solidarity, thus strengthening the fabric of their labour network.

Chris Kraus's book *Video Green* informs my approach to these nonethnographic, nondocumentary film/video projects. Kraus raises questions about the aesthetics of events that depict political suffering. Referencing Chantal Akerman's *D'Est* (1993) in a discussion of a video by Dan Asher, she writes:

Unlike Chantal Akerman's rigorously interstitial movie *D'Est* (1993), Dan's videos are selectively interstitial. Documenting personal rituals and small significant events within the flow of detritus in changing urban centers, he's more like an anthropologist than an artist. Even as I write this, I'm wondering to what extent *D'Est*'s formal rigor shields us from the implications of its content. The endless tracking shots of huddled crowds in terminals in *D'Est*, punctuated with the off-screen

strain of violins, makes the decenteredness of these newly "liberated" countries into something existential and not circumstantial, and this (I think) is the dilemma surrounding everything our culture deems great art. 14

Kraus's critique stands in support of the straightforward, modest camerawork that we encounter in the Labour in a Single Shot videos. Ehmann and Farocki's project might also, through the use of real-time observation, resist those "formal rigors" and the "existential" readings Kraus describes, in the interest of a fidelity to the immediacy of the human hand – often in both the work shown and the camerawork itself. Kraus's comparison between "anthropological" and "existential" renderings in art is helpful and poses a profound moral question about the hypnotic power of beauty to undermine representation of the deep troubles of our times in works of art. It also raises questions about which aesthetic choices and tools of communication might make viewers more receptive to the process of bearing witness. The non-Labour artists mentioned do not fall into either category – the "anthropological" or the "existential" – but rather blend the two, taking advantage of the aesthetic powers of both.

The works I have discussed use nonprofessional actors and varying shades of realism and abstraction to invent new encounters with compelling subjects in moving images. These artist-made videos do not feign objectivity: the workers collaborate in the theatricalization of their own work. This might afford a place for fantasy for both artists and workers to reimagine the role of labour or one's relationship to it. Perhaps getting to play oneself in a movie provides some of the grandeur and distancing that gave mid-twentieth-century social realism its charge, and infuses reality with the potential for rewriting it in the journey towards a different kind of authentic memory. These artworks afford the possibility of a collective re-remembrance of a past event. In the process of making a new version of the story, an expanded community (workers, artists, audience) invests care in the lives depicted on-screen. This attention can be felt and shared by all, including the workers, as a new circuit of care that moves beyond the usual set of demands in the relationship between worker and employer.

While Kraus's point reveals the dangerous potential for the trivialization of suffering and real political circumstances through art, there can also be ways artists work with metaphor, abstraction, and existential questioning

that fracture and re-route emotional arrangements and commitments. The artists I have discussed all have relationships to pedagogical practices and have taught for large parts of their careers, much like Ehmann and Farocki, and are seasoned facilitators of processes of collective invention in which the group is greater than its individual parts, and thus share values concerning group process and dialogism. In many of these artists' pieces, the bonds of trust, solidarity, camaraderie, and physical closeness and intimacy created between workers who already know one another are redirected into moments of reflection, play, and theatrical communication of the *idea* of the work of the worker, rather than towards the actual work itself. Instead of labouring at their actual work, workers perform other forms of work, or work-related gestures, for the camera and for an imagined audience, such as the men in *Four Parallel Lines* who drag planks of wood along the beach or Supriatin pretending she is leaving the maid-training agency to visit her daughter in *I'm the only one that hasn't flown yet*.

In the videos *Cuenta*, *Route 3*, *I'm the only one that hasn't flown yet*, or *A Pattern*, the sensations and impulses of building and collaboration between workers swerve in other directions: towards a fantasy of eating cake with a grandmother; towards showing the displaced inhabitants of Botan marking their movement through the old town, from which they became estranged, with the procession of an otherwise pointless object that only takes on meaning through their collective effort of carrying it around the city; towards connecting imagery of workers moving clothing racks through the city in the 1970s with those moving racks in 2014; or towards enacting a scenario of escape to experience the emotional flow of support from a worker's family to her new friends at the maid-training agency. In these processes, which are facilitated by artists, new connections or friendships are nurtured and new memories of togetherness are created. In the making of the videos, previous sensations of work transform into new forms of fantasy that can be realized with fellow workers.

These artists show the connection between the real people and real politics that Kraus stresses, while the viewer witnesses a different kind of activity: watching workers *voluntarily* make metaphors or stories out of their own lives. In the process, workers might conjure an imagined audience – and perform for the film-making crew with whom they have created real relationships and shared concerns – both in and beyond the framework of their own labour. These works address Farocki's declaration of an absence of images of labour. They generate new images of workers, using observation while adding new techniques of dialogue, collaboration, and creative intervention

Coda

Thinking of Farocki's interest in all facets of labour, I can add my own reflections on writing, and on the interior life of one worker. It is worthwhile to mention that writing this essay was a process of escalating grief: at first, I was energized and happy to revisit Farocki's work, but slowly this turned to a deeper, wider, and eventually infinite sadness about his loss as a highly unique producer who defied categories, and whose production had finally ended. My work was not "hard labour" for a wage but rather immaterial and unpaid, nothing at all like the repetitive work in the *Hat* video that inspired my projective fantasy of worker tedium. Nonetheless, in the process of writing, I struggled with my own boredom or alienated feelings as I faced the tenebrous, painful sensation that the writing might never end, as well as with simply not wanting to write - nor to face the loss of Farocki's continued production and potential future works. The fear of the death of Farocki's brand of twenty- and twenty-first-century intellectualism – or of the limits (or death) of my own intellectualism as I worked to connect and rearrange existing and new ideas – proved to be part of the toil. I worked in cafés and libraries filled with other living, breathing bodies who worked beside me. 15

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¹⁵ Special thanks to my mother, Peggy Simms, for her editing suggestions, and for pointing out that the women leaving the Lumière brothers' factory were not necessarily ecstatically leaving the factory but were headed to their other jobs: housework, cooking, and caretaking; to Amy Sadao for her rewrites; to Gregory Williams, Roy Grundmann, and Peter Schwartz for their edits; and to all the artists for sharing their work with me.

About the Author

Jeannie Simms is an artist who produces photographs, videos, and objects often focused on precarious geopolitical situations, conjuring desires and fantasies from real people in settings of labour and migration. Through an interplay of intercultural collaboration, conversation, and staging, her works incorporate performances, interviews, and observational filming to create media works that defy categorization. She is a professor of the practice in photography at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Tufts University.

This collection of essays offers a critical assessment of Labour in a Single Shot, a groundbreaking documentary video workshop. From 2011 to 2014, curator Antje Ehmann and film- and video-maker Harun Farocki produced an art project of truly global proportions. They travelled to fifteen cities around the world to conduct workshops inspired by cinema history's first film, Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory, shot in 1895 by the Lumière brothers in France.

While the workshop videos are in

While the workshop videos are in colour and the camera was not required to remain static, Ehmann and Farocki's students were tasked with honouring the original Lumière film's basic parameters of theme and style. The fascinating result is a collection of more than 550 short videos that have appeared in international exhibitions and on an open-access website, offering the widest possible audience

multiple contexts around the world.



IN TRANSITION

Roy Grundmann is Associate Professor of Film Studies at Boston University.

Peter J. Schwartz is Associate Professor of German, Comparative Literature, and Film at Boston University.

Gregory H. Williams is Associate Professor of Contemporary and Modern Art History at

the opportunity to ponder contemporary labour in



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Boston University.