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Intermittent Conversations on Leaving the Factory


- Thérèse! Come in and have a look. Look.
- We had the same thing at the factory.
- That’s what I was about to say.
- Wait let me look underneath. It’s exactly the same.
- Yes.

Displaying a mingling of surprise and recognition, this excited dialogue unfolds between two women in Wendelien van Oldenborgh’s recent slide piece “Après la reprise, la prise” (2009). The object that causes the startlement of the two women, an industrial sewing machine, is clearly familiar to them from their working past, but the object does not appear in its proper place. To underscore this sense of dislocation, the women themselves are absent from the projected images, leaving the viewers alone to observe what appears to be a vacant classroom in a state of partial dismantlement; vacant, that is, except for the row of silent sewing machines hiding under white covers.

- So this workshop has also been shut down. It’s shut down.
- Do you think so?
- Of course. There is plenty of fabric left. Like at our factory. We’d started [sic] things which were left unfinished.

For the two women the encounter with the machines was unexpected, however this event was not wholly the result of chance (which is not to say that their words were scripted beforehand). Their response to the situation was spontaneous, as far as we can determine. The mise-en-scène, however, was certainly no accident, but due to a deliberate decision on the part of the artist, thereby opening a “multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness”.

Van Oldenborgh’s recent work may serve as a point of departure in what forms but a tentative attempt on my part to bring art history in dialogue with a central concern of the contemporary discourse on political aesthetics, namely its focus on problems of political ontology that attend the emergence of a post-Fordist society. In recent years, we have seen a distinct shift from the type of epistemological inquiry, which preoccupied art criticism in the wake of minimalism’s negation of a modernist ontology of the medium, towards a heightened focus on the relation of artistic practice to ontological problems of a political nature. And with this shift comes a cluster of concepts that seek to develop an alternative to
a dialectical model of writing history that all too often has been caught within a cul-de-sac of its own making. “Après la reprise, la prise” can serve in the present context as no more than an indicator of the possible repercussions that an ontogenetic paradigm of criticism may have for art historical thought.

As one may gather from the fragmentary and desultory conversation of the two women in “Après la reprise, la prise”, they were employed in the garment industry until the late 1990s. Working in a Levi’s jeans factory, the production facility had been transferred to a lower-wage countries despite the lengthy, public struggle that the factory women staged in order to save a means of living (and way of life) which had sustained most of them from a very young age. As a matter of fact, the story of these two women is quite exceptional; unlike many of their former colleagues who were condemned to a state of permanent unemployment, the former were able to transform themselves into actresses through the subvention of the dramatist Bruno Lajara. They became itinerant performers in a play, “501 Blues”, based on their former experience as factory workers and labor activists.

Not all is spontaneous, therefore, in “Après la reprise, la prise”. These women are performing, if not in any ordinary sense of the word since they are invested in the parts they perform. Indeed how is one to distinguish the performance and the performative in their case? Likewise, the title of the play, “501 Blues”, implies a mournful (if not nostalgic) relationship to a traumatic past that is distant, yet never concluded. The violent intervention of a globalized economy within the personal lives of these women, abruptly ending their way of being-together (i.e. the ‘complex labor’ of machine production, which, as Toni Negri, among others, points out, forms but a prefiguration of the ‘social factory’ of post-Fordism.) After an interlude of intense, political mobilization, this intervention would be experienced by many as an abrupt cancellation of their selfhood, a terminal condition in more sense than one, whereas for the two women in “Après la reprise, la prise”, the termination of their former lives would open on to a renewed process of individuation.

To follow Paolo Virno, individuation concerns a mutagenic (and non-dialectical) process of “permanent interweaving [between] pre-individual elements and individuated characteristics”, which becomes embodied within the paradoxical entity of the social individual. This is no “Hege- lian whimsy” or fanciful product of dialectical thought in which opposites are united. According to Virno, the social individual is “the individual who openly exhibits a unique ontogenesis, a unique development”, whereby pre-individual or generic human faculties (e.g. language, sensory perception, social cooperation) collaborate in the production of the individuated self. According to this theory, therefore, individuation always precedes the individual. Individuality does not derive from a reservoir of fixed social types, but emerges from a prior ontological condition of disparation which is charaterized by a “mobile overlapping of incompatible wholes, almost similar, and yet disparate”; or, to be short, a multitude of singularities without common measure. The political act of individuation is triggered by some unexpected and unprecedented event that precipitates a form of intercommunication between these singularities and the invention of a shared space of speech and action, which may disappear as soon as it appears, like a demonstration
that disperses without leaving a permanent social organization in place.  

There is more, much more, that needs to be said on this matter, but note, for now, the fundamental dissymmetry that is built into this model of individuation – a dissymmetry that no representational theory of politics, or a dialectics of individuality and collectivity, can fully resolve or overcome. At least, that is the aim of such a theory of individuation, namely to establish a kind of surplus of human potential that can never be fully valorized within capitalism. Hence, the crucial category of the unforeseen event; that is, of the singular instant or “moment of rupture and opening of temporality” which is filled with a ‘decision’ that adheres to no prior, political blue-print of action (as in party politics). It follows that one of the central difficulties of such an ontogentic theory becomes, precisely, the writing or representation of history, as we will see.

One of the more fascinating aspects of “Après la reprise, la prise” is that it puts the model of individuation to test without following any didactic intentions. Spectator and performer are equally implicated in the formal logic of the work, which constructs its own temporal dissymmetry as hinted at by the title that positions a prise (of speech? of identity? of power?) after the reprise, a word that in French carries such various meanings as the return to work after a strike, the mending of a fabric, or the revival of a film or television series. Perhaps it is best to say that “Après la reprise, la prise” problematizes (rather than illustrates) such a theory of individuation. A theory, finally, that assumes a central place in so many current debates on the possibilities of artistic resistance within the all-enclosing, informational spaces of post-Fordist society. But how to give material form to this problematic?

As mentioned before, in the case of the two female performers, the conventional dichotomies between actor and character, amateur and professional, begin to breakdown. Their encounter with the sewing machines is as much conditioned by their past as filles d’usine as their present as théâtreuses. Concomitantly, we are compelled to rethink the old notion of the paradox of the actor in view of the new situation presented of these women who are performing their past life in order to make a living in the present.

A new situation, but not an unfamiliar one: Van Oldenborgh appears to offer a textbook example of the transformation of Fordist into post-Fordist labor, which, in Virno’s estimation, assumes the virtuosic character of the non-productive activity of the performing artist. Let me briefly rehearse this well-known thesis, which has gained some traction within the contemporary discourse of art history and film studies. Following certain ideas of Hannah Arendt, among others, Virno defines the actor as the embodiment of a communicative activity-without-end-product, which is materialized in its most elementary, locutionary form by the speech act. And considering the fact that the speech act is a characteristic shared by the virtuosic performance and political action alike, post-Fordism has ingested, as it were, a complex of political actions in the course of establishing a hegemonic mode of social labor that covers “all the time of life”. As a result, to thrive in this new economic milieu of cognitive and affective labor, workers will need to develop and hone their “skills and aptitudes of a political kind”.

- Did you enjoy this job?
I can’t say ‘enjoy’, but the atmosphere, the girls ... I’d grown attached to them. It was like a second family.

The two women live intermittently, reworking the disparities between past and present. The script of “501 Bleus” was drafted in a writing workshop with several of the unemployed women from the Levi’s factory. The text testifies to the hardship and exploitative nature of industrial labor, but also the solidarity that gave their lives meaning. The ubiquitous blue pigment that spread everywhere, even impregnating their skin, became an ambivalent sign of this collective identity. “501 Blues”, therefore, celebrates the communal existence that these factory women forged for themselves, but it also represents a swan song to a disappearing mode of sociability.

“501 Blues” is a conflicted undertaking: for what is the purpose of this commemorative act? Does it constitute a ‘final scene’ that bids farewell to a form of life (and militant action) that is now firmly behind us? What is significant here is their prise de parole, the decision of these women to speak out. “501 Blues” was born of this (temporary) liberation of speech:

- How did you feel after you found your new work?
- I felt well, to be able to speak, because in the factory I could not speak out. Or say what I was thinking.

Whereas the theatre gave us the possibility of saying what we were thinking.

Lajara choose not to let the women speak their own words. In contrast to the classical tradition of worker’s theater, where authenticity of gesture and expression is paramount, in “501 Blues” the women never played ‘themselves’, as if to emphasize the cohabitation of the pre-individual and the individual within the complex of the ‘social individual’. Yet with this performance, came a new form of command: one of the mind as well as the body. Cultural production is not just the realization of life as play; it comes with its own disciplinary measures, putting the women through an arduous regime of memorization, speech training and stage rehearsal:

And anyway, with the director, afterwards, it was ... the same. If you like, because it was stressful with him too.

Acting is not only a stressful occupation, it is precarious as well. Within the French social welfare system, these women are categorized as intermittents. Their professional status as cultural workers is determined according to the ‘archaic’ Fordist measure of hours worked per month. It is what it is’, remarks one of the women. “Everything is sporadic. Even the money is sporadic.” And now, it appears, they are no longer eligible for intermittency: “We’re back to square one”, one woman states. And as she pronounces these words, the screen momentarily goes blank as if the projection apparatus is being reset to zero.

Resetting time to zero is what capitalism does best. If post-Fordism derives its surplus value from the cooperative nature of social labor, this surplus depends on that originary structure of disparation, which is defined by a theory of individuation. Capitalism draws down the ‘innumerable’ excess of communicative activity to the calculable power of ones and zeros. In other words, capitalism strives to capture the immeasurable, to contain the irreversible time of individuation within its circular logic of revaluation. To some critics, such as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in “The New Spirit of Capitalism”,...
this means that post-Fordism has absorbed, if not fully recuperated the legacy of ‘artistic critique’ by fostering more flexible, mutable modes of subjectivity which define the new creative classes. As Maurizio Lazzarato observes, the tendency of many economists and sociologists to posit artistic activity as a model of current transformations within the labor market is certainly ambiguous and deserves to be interrogated in depth. This is not the place, however, to pursue an investigation of the “malheurs de la critique de la ‘critique artiste’”, beyond noting that such arguments seem to reawaken a familiar, dialectical pitfall of reason. The whole problem may very well lie in their choice of words: is ‘critique’ truly the operative term to describe current modes of political aesthetics? To assert, for instance, that an artistic liberation of desire (that is passed on to the ‘movement of May ’68’), “opened up an opportunity for capitalism to base itself on new forms of control and commodify new, more individualized and ‘authentic’ goods”, Boltanski and Chiapello leave art little room to maneuver in. Indeed, they literally state that artistic critique can only exist in a state of paralysis, caught in a dilemma between affirming a “reactionary nostalgia for an idealized past” or continuing to denounce the bourgeois institutions of society, which only produces more grist for the mill of the media industry. And thus the authors come close to reiterating that earlier, infamous verdict on artistic critique, advanced by Peter Bürger, who judged the neo-avant-garde to be no more than an empty repetition, a commodified replica of intransigent politics of the historical avant-garde. As we know, the harshness of Bürger’s conclusion suffers from the abstraction of his particular mode of historical dialectics, but it is not just the need for a more refined dialectic that stands in question here.

In order to respond to this challenge, let me return to the affective interplay of recognition and surprise, with which “Après la reprise, la prise” opens. Jacques Rancière has contributed some excellent comments on this very dichotomy, faced with the plethora of ‘social-fiction’ movies emerging in the wake of the worker struggles of the 1980s and 1990s. Referring to such films as “Nadia and the Hippos”, Rancière exposes a prevalent form of socio-fictional compromise in contemporary cinema: the reality of the familiar (i.e. class politics) is juxtaposed to the reality of the unexpected or aberrant. This compromise engenders a state of paralysis, whereby ‘life’ is antithetical to ‘politics’. But why, Rancière asks, must we continue to construct fictions that attest to the real, if the real is already given in certain images? To provide an example, he mentions the film “La Reprise” by Hervé le Roux, which is constructed around a short film, “La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder”, that was shot by young students of the film academy during June 1968, just as those events were coming to an (inconclusive) end. Only ten minutes long, “La Reprise du travail” has become something of a ‘classic’ of documentary film. Serge Daney, for instance, has called it the primitive scene of militant cinema. By chance, the film students captured on celluloid a gathering of social actors associated with the standard ‘theater’ of May ’68, including an union official, a gauchiste student, a factory manager, and a mêlée of (mostly silent) factory workers. In the midst of this routine drama, however, an unscripted event occurs: the distraught cry of a female factory worker, who denounces the imminent betrayal by the union of
the revolutionary desire to live life differently. She adamantly refuses to re-enter the factory, despite the attempts of the CGT official to coax her back into the fold:

- We need to be vigilant together. Because we don’t get anything alone. You’re comrades decided.
- No, I won’t go back in, I won’t! I won’t put a foot in this clink again! You go in and see what a dump it is!
...  
- It’s not over. It’s a step.

This film presents the primitive scene of militant cinema not only because an unexpected event has been seized, but also because we will forever be rehearsing this particular scene. Not in its historical factuality, that is, but in its singular presence. For who is this woman? “So brief, barely a narrative”, as Kristin Ross remarks, this anonymous ‘no’ does not present a moment within the gradual, step-by-step coming to power of a pre-existing ‘people’, the working class. “Rather, it shows the woman, ‘the people’ if you will, coming into existence in the pure actuality of her refusal.” Or might we now state that “La Reprise du travail” provides a glimpse, necessarily intermittent in character, of that ‘unique ontogenesis’ of the social individual that is born from an act of refusal?

In the face of such an image-event, as Rancière proposes, we need not attest to its reality, rather we must invent its problem by rendering it into a subject of communal investigation [enquête]. This is precisely what Le Roux did. Following the genre of the detective film, he creates a mise-en-scène for the process of recognition, using the pretense of finding the woman (who proves unlocatable in the end), he interviews most of the participants in the original scene. And should the reader still be in any doubt, “Après la reprise, la prise” was conceived in direct dialogue with the preceding two films.

In closing I would like to return to the meandering conversations of “Après la reprise, la prise”, to the problematic that its lacunary phrases pose.

- … My mother … Just talking … A conversation with women … And he said: ‘Keep your mind, though’ … In the end she agreed and I went to my father … He laughed … ‘Girl…You want something from me, don’t you?... I explained it to him … He replied: ‘As long as you stay yourself.’ … But apparently the audition …
- Spotlights!
- A dream … Yeah …

This is not the same two women speaking, but a group of young students who attend a technical school in Mechelen, where the artist shot the work. She invited the two women to meet with these students in their former classrooms. The latter are soon to venture onto the job market for the first time and the two women are thus positioned in a didactic role. It is their task to pass on a form of collective experience that the younger generation will never experience for themselves. Paradoxically, the ‘no’ that expresses the central event in the lives of the Levi workers was the exact opposite of the ‘no’ that is mouthed by the woman at the gates of the Wonder factory in 1968. Both no’s do not attempt to represent a pre-determined aim but to actualize other “possible worlds”, even though it may be argued that both refusals would be parlayed into the new social order. But this need not form an admission of defeat or provide a brief to assume a nostalgic view of history.
In each and every case, it is the singularity of the refusal, following no script or program that we may continue to hear.

A mutational space of intermittent words: we are not listening to the murmur of familiar voices talking, but to a polyphonic discourse. If Van Oldenborgh selected this term herself, its definition is provided by Bakhtin: polyphonic discourse not only makes us privy to the internal contradictions of the object [i.e. its dialectics], but we also become witness to the unfolding of the social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on round any object. In short, we are introduced, as stated at the outset of this text, to the “multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness”. Reading such passages, it should cause no wonder that Bakhtin has been reclaimed by a philosophy of difference, which celebrates an art of conversation that is “not the loss of being in everyday banality (Heidegger), but a constitutive and differentiating power that acts in everyday life”. As Bakhtin proposes, the person who talks always receives the word of an other, each word is inhabited by expressivity of an other. To talk is to enter a discursive field shot through with multiple trajectories of desire. It is not the signification of the words that is most important, but the intonation and emotional affirmations with which they have been invested. In such a dialogic space, one cannot easily attribute words to individuals; in so far as any meaning is established, it is a collective production.

Listen to this inarticulate babble, Van Oldenborgh seems to say, for its signs of life-to-come. Perhaps one might object that the discourse of these students, which seems to enclose the exploration of identity within a specular relationship to the mass media, leaves something to be desired. Spotlights! A dream … Yeah … We all know, for instance, the cinematic metaphor of sewing, the so-called suturing of the subject, that defined a materialist mode of film criticism in the aftermath of May ’68. The conduct of these students could easily be situated within such an analytical framework. Yet, even in its dismantling of the (psycho-analytic) mechanisms of identity, a cinematic theory of suturing leaves little room for a cinematic theory of individuation. The opening scene of “Après la reprise, la prise” seems to be a point in case: here the students apply their hairdressing skills to the actresses, while Van Oldenborgh causes the space of the classroom to fragment in a multiple play of mirror reflections. Nevertheless, in a counterpoint to these images, the off-screen voices discuss the economic precariousness of contemporary labor.

I would venture, therefore, that Van Oldenborgh practices a kind of cinematic materialism that is not judgmental, at least not in any immediately ideological terms. Note, for instance, that although “Après la reprise, la prise” is not a movie (shot on digital film, the slide images were extracted from the original recording), the slide projection is infected with a sense of cinematic movement. We are not subjected to the static, on-off blink of a slide carousel, but watch the images slowly dissolve into each other, creating mutable, shifting patterns of superimposition and lateral displacement. The effect is to create a slow pulse of luminosity, a congealing and temporal distention of discrete moments. Figures and objects appear and vanish within shallow space, their contours stabilizing only momentarily before morphing into other images. Perhaps this descrip-
tion of the perceptual experience of the piece only seems to underscore the ephemeral, immaterial nature of the slide; however by a cinematic materialism I mean something different than the mere 'materiality' of the 'medium'.

"Guided by the experiences of the women", Van Oldenborgh writes, "who have already gone from one stage within the 'world of work' to another, while having been involved in various forms of cultural production, the students and the actresses instruct each other to pose in several acts of transformation, their roles hovering between that of spectator, actor/actress and instructor, all at once." The work conceived as an instruction in posing, the accommodation of gestures and speech to a prise de vue, but always and only après la reprise. Such is the problematic of recognition and surprise: does the reprise return us to some inexhaustible principle of individuation, or does the reprise function as the back-up of a capitalist logic of command that resets all values to zero? How does one decide upon the status of the image-event? What is the status of the reprise of time that these women both enact and commemorate? Are they locked into a representational politics of identity, just La Reprise might be construed as a monument to the lost community of the banlieu ouvrière? Or, alternatively, do those interviews open up a space of dissection in relation to an original event; a space of individuation, not identification? And where, finally, might a dialectical conception of history, which categorizes the event, gives it a place within collective memory, continue to perform its critical function in contrast to a political ontology that only lives for the time of the unexpected? Whereas conclusive answers can not be given on the basis of one work, we owe to "Après la reprise, la prise", at the very least, the articulation of these questions.

Notes
2 I am referring, among others, to the reception of the thought of Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri in such diverse places as artforum, Grey Room and Texte zur Kunst. See also the recent conference "Art and Immaterial Labor" that took place at the Tate Modern in 2008. For the contributions of Negri and Lazzarato, see Radical Philosophy, May/June 2008, no. 149. The significant role of Jacques Rancière in this debate should also not be discounted.
3 In a forthcoming essay on David Lamelas, for instance, I take up the problem of how it is conceivable, from a standpoint of negative dialectics, to argue that an art of pure performativity, as implemented within film by Lamelas, can end up affirming a spectacular logic of the mass media due to its evacuation of the representation of subjectivity or historical memory. Rather than treating such a 'moment' purely as one of blockage, it may be possible to think one's way through such a dilemma in relation to a theory of individuation, without falling into any 'vitalist' mode of argumentation.
4 In 2000, Marie-France Collard made a documentary "Ouvrières du Monde" about the demise of the Levi textile industry in Belgium and France and the transferral of its production facilities to Turkey and Indonesia, where, as Van Oldenborgh notes, labor is not only cheaper, but also more precarious in nature. See Van Oldenborgh's commentary on "Après la reprise, la prise", which provides many of the cinematic and textual sources that I have relied on. Her text can be downloaded at http://www.wilfriedlentz.com/#/Artists/Wendelien_Oldenborgh_van.
8 On the notion that in order to refuse the subjectifying power of governmentality, the community "must not last,
it must have no part in any kind of duration”, see Maurice Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, Barrytown: Station Hill, 1988, p. 32.


10 The repetitive gestures of the factory women, seated behind their sewing machines, were choreographed for the play, thus entering an industrial technique of bodily discipline into another regime of corporeal training. On stage, the sewing machines were only evoked as ghost-like presences only by the movement of the actresses.


12 This preceding passage draws on Negri’s “Time for Revolution”, op. cit., and Paolo Virno, op. cit. I thank Sven Lütticken for drawing my attention to the significance of Negri’s text.

13 Virno, op. cit., p. 57.

14 On the precarious status of the intermittent within neoliberal paradigm of contemporary capitalism, which has given rise to recent social conflicts, see Maurizio Lazzarato, Expérimentations Politiques, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2009.


17 Boltanski and Chiapello, op. cit., p. 467.

18 Ibid.


26 Van Oldenborgh, commentary on “Après la reprise, la prise”.

27 See O’Shaughnessy, “Post-1995 French Cinema”.