

Fly In Time Out Of This World!

Globalisation, Documentarism and Exodus in the Work of Cathleen Schuster and Marcel Dickhage

By Jens Kastner

The focus is on the hands. They take up the centre of the image, moving schematically and sinuously in front of an upper body in black; they hold nothing. They formulate a repeated sequence, right and left expertly in tune. Is it virtuosic, or merely pantomime? Virtuosity, in the words of the post-operaist philosopher Paolo Virno, is initially nothing more than “the special capabilities of a performing artist”.¹ And because performing artists don’t manufacture a product and don’t create a work that can bear witness to their labour once their activity ceases, they are dependent on the presence of an audience. Their performance has no aim – such as a work or a product – other than itself, and thus brings about (or possibly only reveals) something like a basic communication through its dependency on audience who witnesses it. Virno distinguishes purposeless and productless virtuosity from reified labour, only to propose that they interlock. Contemporary capitalism, he maintains, is particularly characterised by its integration of virtuosity, which it makes into a significant element in the production of surplus value. The “potentiality of language”² to produce basic communication and interaction (between performing artist and audience, for example) is now the most important aspect of contemporary production, and virtuosity, “previously a special and problematic case”, has now become the “prototype of all wage labour”.³

The hand movements before the camera give the impression of being without an aim, and there is certainly no product in sight. Furthermore, they not only perform having nothing in them, but much more strongly *no longer* having anything in them, having at one time certainly handled some implement or other. These are gestures of labour, as the film’s title unambiguously reveals. Following Virno, the

hands in motion must have manufactured something material in order to deserve such a title. And indeed they did; they made mobile telephones for NOKIA. The *Gesten einer Arbeit* (Working Gestures) (2012), by Cathleen Schuster and Marcel Dickhage, are the re-enactment of a past production process. But as such they are doubtlessly a (filmed) artistic performance. Labour and virtuosity. Seen in this way it doesn't seem too far-fetched to suggest that these two minutes of playful handiwork reflect the transition between two working regimes: Fordism, with its functional and relatively mind-numbing conveyor-belt mass production here encounters the post-Fordist mode of producing surplus value from virtuosic, creative, immaterial communication skills.

There are further indications that the current status of labour is being discussed in these few manoeuvres. They can be found – as there is no work of art that only stands or speaks for itself, and art always stands in relationship to other art – in the other works by Schuster and Dickhage. What is shown by the installation *Following the line of arguments* (2010/2011) – consisting of the films *Strada Fabricii* and *POI* – can be seen as a macro-political equivalent to the micro-politics constituted in the now physically ingrained *Gesten einer Arbeit*. Here too the subject matter has to do with almost mechanically repeated processes and their significance for contemporary society. And it also has to do with NOKIA mobiles. While taking up and visualising the physical and individual dimension of labour, the two versions of *Strada Fabricii* exemplarily present the economic and political preconditions of today's new relations of production. On the one hand labour, including immaterial labour, is continuing to become ingrained into bodies (and their gestures); on the other, the contemporary economy appears to be particularly characterised by non-material, ephemeral processes. In 'liquid modernity', as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called contemporary Western

societies, because of their general loss of intellectual certainty and social security, liquid capital is not merely a figure of speech⁴ but an aspect of economic and socio-political realities that constitute an important part of the conglomeration of structures and mechanisms that are generally described by the term globalisation.

Liquid, fleeing capital or even globalisation are obviously considerably more difficult to depict than the manual habits inherent to production, for example. The art critic and cultural theorist Christian Höller has discussed this difficulty in relation to a number of artistic "uncoverings".⁵ Art production, he says, has for the most part expressed the "contradictory tendencies and especially local effects" of globalisation, but rarely a "universal law"⁶ of the phenomenon. Perhaps it is initially only a local effect when the production of NOKIA mobile phones is relocated from Bochum in Germany to Cluj in Romania, where operating conditions are more friendly to capital and political circumstances more repressive (photography and filming are not permitted at the plant; workers who talk to journalists – or artists – run the risk of losing their jobs). But despite local specifics it looks very much like a universal law of globalisation when the Romanian factory is closed barely three years later for the same reason ("too expensive") and NOKIA's phone production is transferred to Hanoi. This occurred during shooting, as the voiceover explains. We don't of course see fleeing capital whizzing across the screen. Mainly we see a dusty road slowly rolling under us from a driver's perspective, a road lined with dreary houses which also goes past a factory from communist times. It is the factory road that gives the film its title. Outside the city, in Jucu, lies the NOKIA works, which is circled by car and camera. "We follow Strada Fabricii, the Factory Road, from the periphery towards the city. It originates in the Bulevardul Muncii, the Boulevard of Labour" (Schuster/Dickhage). The factory, as if history had also



inscribed itself here into the urban place names, can naturally only arise from labour. According to Marx and Engels, not only the factory but also human life itself arise from labour, "to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say: labour created man himself".⁷ This means that it is only the actual activity of production and its organisation that 'fabricates' us as individuals, but also as a species. And because the distribution of activity isn't renewed every morning, but refers back to what has already been distributed, it develops into a "material power above us".⁸ This power is characterised by the fact that it is taken for granted and unquestioned. In his early writings Marx was concerned among other things with the question of how this material power can be seen through and encountered. Without going into the entire discussion about ideology and its critique here, one of the preconditions for seeing through material power and our conscious or unconscious ideas about it is at any rate to reflect on the relations of production. The conditions under which production occurs initially need to be understood.

The camera goes past the factory in the car because filming is not permitted inside. In this respect it only shows the facts of globalisation but also the conditions of the film's own production, of art production. The viewer is condemned to these circular movements around the factory because the conditions of production (as material power) don't allow intrusion from outside. The voiceover merely tells of being in one of the grey prefab apartments that were built between 1970 and 1989 for the workers of an earlier factory, and of meeting a furious female worker there. But only the exterior is seen.

Two things should be mentioned initially: first, the hands encircling a now absent object and the car orbiting the factory elaborate different dimensions of contemporary relations of production; these film works find visual ways to make typical post-Fordist, globalised

cycles apparent and to comment on them. In this respect Schuster and Dickhage succeed in apprehending globalisation “in its multi-dimensionality”.⁹

Second, these visualisations, conveyed through their form, refer to art production itself. They are not concerned with illustration; *Strada Fabricii* is not only an attempt to capture globalisation in discerning images, and through them to criticise what is shown, as if images could be employed as a neutral means and hadn't themselves always been involved. The tradition of documentary art in particular has always had to struggle with the fact that the images selected or produced in order to point out injustice and grievances are themselves a part of these unfortunate conditions and never exist outside of them. Documentary images, as the cultural critic Hito Steyerl has remarked following Michel Foucault, are always part of a “politics of truth”,¹⁰ in which they not only depict reality, but also co-construct it on the basis of existing images (in one's mind or wherever). So documentary art, if it takes itself seriously, needs to reflect its own involvedness. And this is what happens in the works of Schuster and Dickhage when *Strada Fabricii* bears the traces of its own production, for example. And when it is staged in such a way that although we have to see it as a complete (and completely thought-through) statement, it nevertheless remains excerpt-like through its presentation not in the cinema or on an isolated television screen, but within an installation. One of the films, *POI*, is projected onto a large chipboard wall placed at a slight tilt in the middle of the exhibition space. Its support props can be seen behind it, and there is a small television showing the other film, *Strada Fabricii*, as if the main film needs supplementation or to be provided with alternatives.

Just as *Gesten einer Arbeit* and *Following the line of arguments* correspond in relation to the subject of globalisation (micro- and

macro-politics of changing relationships of production), connections can also be made between various works of Schuster and Dickhage in regard to documentarism or the politics in which images are embedded. Although it also becomes clear that these connections and supplementations are not purely thematic, and that this is not an art of mere content.

A scepticism about the unambiguity or truth of images is conveyed in works such as *Ohne Titel (A4)* (Untitled (A4)) (2009), in which thirty details from (not further specified) press photographs, film stills and archive images are papered onto the wall as a block of DIN A4 laser prints. Or in *Territorien* (Territories) (2009), a work showing aerial photographs of Saudi Arabia whose grainy orange-green perhaps still refers to the time they were taken (1980) but otherwise to nothing else. There is no essence to these images, nothing that can be read from them, but rather (*Ohne Titel (A4)*) the reference to the direct context that makes the story, or (*Territorien*) the invitation to speculation (are they military surveillance photographs? is it art? or are they tourist shots of landing at the airport?). In both cases it is clear that it is the context which generates the meaning. But in relation to the documentary aspect of their work, Schuster and Dickhage don't represent a radical constructivism that disallows a reality separate from what is depicted (or said). This becomes apparent in works like *Unfinished Business* (2009). The manner of visual presentation makes it clear that here too there is no universal perspective and that the images evoke particular realities in the viewer. But, as is unquestionably established, the images are also based on particular realities, namely the economic relations between West Germany and Iran. During the 1970s Schuster's father was an engineer involved in building the nuclear power station near Bushehr on the Persian Gulf. This deal remained unfinished because of the outbreak of the revolution.



However, German companies such as Krupp remained active in the country after the seizure of power by the clergy; Germany is still one of the most important trading partners of the mullah regime. These business deals also remain unfinished because Germany's economic relations with the shah's dictatorship have not been dealt with.

The film is an essay, and tells the story of the European engineers and technicians building the Iranian power plant who were surprised by the revolution. Suddenly there were pictures of Khomeini all over the building site and its vehicles. An engineer/technician condones this as better than any glass-breakage insurance. No one throws stones at the ayatollah after all. The photograph that can be seen during this statement shows a young, apparently Western European family (father, mother, child plus grandma, probably) in front of a yellow bus whose windows display a Playboy sticker and a portrait of the ayatollah. Images are never innocent. The film is an almost exclusive compilation of stills: family snapshots and photographs from the German Press Agency (dpa), diary entries (for example, "strike") and newspaper clippings, but most of the documents belong to the workers themselves. The film shows that history (revolution, economic relations) takes place – this is, it is authenticated and negotiable – when it is found in private albums and thus in personal states of mind. Beer-drinking technicians around a table, Southern Iranian industrial landscapes: the collage of concrete historical moments brings about an inescapable (but always differently representable) reality. In the end the workers leave the country. The film begins with a quote from the film-maker Harun Farocki which might also be a good motto for *Following the line of arguments*: "The first camera in the history of film was aimed at a factory."¹¹

So if certain works deal with macro- and micro-political dimensions (of globalisation), another concerns the poles of constructivism

and realism, which are neither explored as absolute standpoints nor in their genealogy (spanning criminalistics, journalism and art). The two poles, which no one any longer represents in their pure form, are thus established as an aspect of the politics of truth, which Foucault saw images as being involved in.

“In their depictive function images represent an already formed reality,” writes Roswitha Breckner, “and generate it at the same time through a *visual* production of meaning.”¹² This relatively laconic observation that images create realities by creating meaning has always been one of the starting points for the socio-critical, even utopian potential of art. Paolo Virno’s analysis of virtuosity in general also resonates with these (emancipatory) possibilities. Although the creative and communicative aspects of human activity in post-Fordism appear to be entirely integrated into the production of surplus value, this integration is ambivalent. It can also be, or turn out to be, a “productive resource”¹³ that disturbs and interrupts and gives rise to something completely different. Elsewhere Virno goes into more detail about such “engaged withdrawal”¹⁴ as a form of active disobedience, calling it “exodus”. This too arises from a basic interaction; exodus is always aimed at the “material power above us”. It is always a way of reassembling reality, of establishing new standards of perception, which Virno sees as springing from art production and social movements.¹⁵ In *After the future archive* (2009) Schuster and Dickhage position magazine advertisements which illustrate or claim visionary, utopian potentials. An excerpt can be seen on the artists’ website in which an Air France advert hangs next to one for Sony. If the slogans are read as a continuous text – and they come from advertisements, please note, which in other left-wing cultural analyses are seen as the “pure representation of social power”¹⁶ – they can be read as a call to exodus: “Fly in time” “out of this world”!

- 1 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti and James Cascaito, New York, Semiotext(e) 2004, p. 52.
- 2 Ibid., p. 56.
- 3 Ibid., p. 61. Virno's ontological focus certainly tends to essentialise such concepts as virtuosity. At least he doesn't elaborate on the fact that – as Pierre Bourdieu has remarked – it is the specific ideology of the artistic field that “treats the virtuosity attained through the efforts involved in a methodical learning process as gift one is born with”. Translated from Pierre Bourdieu, *Zur Soziologie der symbolischen Formen*, trans. Wolfgang Fietkau, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp Verlag 1974, p. 194.
- 4 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, London, Blackwell 2000.
- 5 Translated from Christian Höller, ‘Imag(in)ing Globalization. Oder: Wie lässt sich etwas fassbar machen, wofür die widersprüchlichsten Bilder existieren?’ in Gerald Raunig (ed.), *Transversal. Kunst und Globalisierungskritik*, Vienna, Verlag Turia + Kant 2003, pp. 79-87: 82.
- 6 Translated from ibid., p. 80.
- 7 Friedrich Engels, ‘The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man’, in ibid. *Dialectics of Nature*, Moscow, Foreign Languages Press 1954, p. 228.
- 8 Karl Marx, ‘The German Ideology’, in ibid. and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Amherst, Prometheus Books 1976, p. 53.
- 9 Translated from Höller 2003, loc. cit., p. 81.
- 10 Translated from Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit. Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld*, Vienna, Verlag Turia + Kant 2008, p. 115.
The quotation refers to the film ‘Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon’ by Auguste and Jean Lumière (1895). The curator Yvonne Volkart discusses Cathleen Schuster's work against the background of the ‘committed factory film’: see Yvonne Volkart, ‘Schränke aufschliessen und Bilder projizieren’, in: *Cathleen Schuster*, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff Stipendium (publ.), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 4 February – 8 April 2012, pp. 14-16: 16.
- 11 Translated from Roswitha Breckner: *Sozialtheorie des Bildes. Zur interpretativen Analyse von Bildern und Fotografien*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag 2010, p. 265.
- 12 Virno 2005, loc. cit., p. 69.
- 13 Paolo Virno, ‘Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus’, in ibid. and Michael Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2006, p. 196.
- 14 Paolo Virno, ‘The Dismmeasure of Art. An Interview with Paolo Virno by Sonja Laevert and Pascal Gielen’, in Pascal Gielen, Paul De Bruyne (eds.), *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, Rotterdam, NAI Publishers 2009, p. 19f.
- 15 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford, Stanford University Press 2002, p. 132.

From the book:

The performing archive

Cathleen Schuster/Marcel Dickhage

© 2013 with the artists and authors

ISBN 978-3-86206-214-0

Verlag Kettler, Bönen, 2013
www.verlag-kettler.de

Jens Kastner

born 1970, Dr. phil., sociologist and art historian, is a freelance author and university lecturer in Vienna, where he teaches at the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

p 57

Film still from „Strada Fabricii (II)“, 2011-2012.

p 61

Russian 1:50.000 Scale Map of Bushehr (location and site), ca. 1980. Found at: www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/bushehr-location_005.htm