

Harun Farocki's *Labour in a Single Shot* in Berlin: An exhibition of films about working people

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Labour in a Single Shot is an exhibition curated by German filmmaker Harun Farocki (1944-2014) and his wife Antje Ehmman. It brings together dozens of short films made under Farocki's guidance, all of which are united around a single theme: work. Having already toured a number of cities internationally, the collection was recently displayed at the House of World Cultures in Berlin.

Farocki (born in the Sudetenland, now the Czech Republic, to an Indian émigré father and German mother) and Ehmman began the project in 2011, when they hosted video production workshops in fifteen countries. Filmmakers attending the workshops were asked to "produce videos of 1 to 2 minutes in length, each taken in a single shot." The subject to be filmed was labour, "paid and unpaid, material and immaterial, rich in tradition or altogether new."

In the end, several hundred films about working people were created. A generous selection of them appears in the exhibition. They may also be seen free of charge on the project's official web site.

When Farocki's collaborators are able to capture the rhythm and energy of working people, their films become interesting. In Amy van Houten's aptly named *Nimble Fingers*, one watches as a worker at a textile factory in Johannesburg, South Africa, performs quality checks of completed clothing. In Mena el Shazly's *Cola Bottles*, workers in Cairo, Egypt, move a new shipment of soda bottles into storage by tossing heavy bundles of them back and forth, at a speed that allows little margin for error.

In both cases, the workers move swiftly, performing tasks that have become second nature to them. They know their jobs and perform them with expert hands, lending an almost effortless appearance to what is surely difficult work.

Footage from Bangalore, India, is among the most impressive. In *Cart Avenue*, an elderly man hauling a heavy load by wheelbarrow is forced to wait as a parade of revelers passes before him. In *Drum*, we see people washing clothes and beating them with tremendous effort against stone basins. In *Shoe Shop*, stacked boxes of shoes are thrown to a man who catches them, still stacked, before placing them on shelves.

Unfortunately, a majority of the films are less interesting than those described. Much of the footage presented is not especially noteworthy.

Many of the filmmakers have adopted "direct cinema" techniques and taken them to the extreme. This is point-and-click filmmaking in which the attitudes of the artists toward their subject mostly remain a secret; virtually any kind of critical voice is abandoned so that "reality may speak for itself"—at least that's the idea. In large part, they simply film what is taking place and dutifully deliver it to audiences.

This "objective" approach, never as neutral as it purports to be, is not so much a way of showing things as they are, but rather presenting them in the most superficial, unchallenging manner. Lacking an understanding or interest in the social forces behind and historical roots of the conditions they observe, the filmmakers find themselves adrift. They shoot anything and everything, elevating the arbitrary and obvious to the level of the profound, never quite able to tell them apart.

Of course, these are not intended to be narrative films, as such, nor lengthy documentary exposés. The project is more akin to a photography exhibition. But where are the images that speak volumes, which expose something essential about their subject?

When it comes to a film like *Putin*, the contribution from director Oleksiy Radynski, this "neutral" approach is especially troubling. In Radynski's film, a Vladimir Putin impersonator stands on a street in Moscow, while just a few feet away lookalikes of Lenin and Stalin pose together for a photo with a tourist. All of them are linked together by a single panning shot.

What is the filmmaker trying to say, and what is his attitude toward the figures in front of his camera? It's impossible to say for certain (although one fears the worst), but at the very least an unserious attitude toward some of the most important questions raised by the events of the last century lingers beneath the work.

In a room adjacent to the main exhibition gallery, sixteen monitors are set up in a row. The first shows the film that inspired the project and has fascinated Farocki for decades: *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*, by brothers

Auguste and Louis Lumière. Made in 1895 and lasting only 46 seconds, the film is composed of a single, static shot of workers leaving a factory at the end of their shift. The remaining fifteen screens show modern-day versions filmed in each of the project's fifteen locations, as workers pour out of their factories to be captured on video in a single, motionless frame.

The results are generally tedious and repetitive. Workers do not need to go to an exhibition to encounter the same tedium they experience every working day. The often poorly-placed cameras have recorded little of interest or significance. The only exception is a film of young, smiling women who run as they leave their workplace in Hangzhou, China.

Augmenting the main exhibit is Farocki's own 2006 video installation *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades*. A truncated version of his 1995 film *Workers Leaving the Factory*, it displays movie clips of workers leaving their jobs on 12 different monitors simultaneously. One finds it difficult to say more about it than that, so small was its impact. Some of the images are striking, but less so than when situated in their original narrative contexts.

Harun Farocki died July 30, 2014, at the age of 70. By that time he had made more than 90 films on a wide range of subjects. *Labour in a Single Shot* proved to be his last major project.

Farocki belonged to a generation of artists who emerged from the protest movements of the late 1960s to make a number of radical, anti-war films that might be better described as "video polemics." In the wake of the betrayal of the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s by the Stalinist and other bureaucracies many artists were drawn to post-modernism, and the ideas associated with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School.

Farocki's work had much in common with the mostly unwatchable films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet and those made by Jean-Luc Godard in collaboration with the Dziga Vertov group between 1968 and 1972. Like Godard, Farocki was closest to Maoist politics at this time.

The post-modern deconstruction and repurposing of found images and other formal exercises were the hallmarks of such films. They tended to be cold, academic works, as lifeless as they were condescending. Rejecting the ability of the working class to act for itself, and side-stepping the issue of the role played by definite political tendencies and leaderships, these filmmakers sought out largely formal means of shocking what they believed to be a complacent, or worse, *complicit* population into action.

As the WSWs noted in 2003, "For the most part ... Farocki is the master of the obvious, rather pedantically explaining to his audience things he feels it ought to know." He seems, we wrote, to be one of those leftists "who has intriguing ideas about every imaginable process ... except the most critical ones."

"One has no idea, after the viewing of several of his films and

reading interviews and some of his own essays, where he stands on the critical experiences of the 20th century: above all, the fate of the Russian Revolution, Trotskyism versus Stalinism, the nature of the regimes in East Germany and eastern Europe, German reunification, etc."

Farocki produced several didactic political films that either defended reactionary Maoist conceptions or do not hold up well today. In *The Words of the Chairman* (1967), pages from Mao Zedong's "Little Red Book" are turned into literal weapons. *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), about the use of Napalm bombs in the Vietnam War, features an infamous scene in which Farocki burns his own arm with a cigarette to illustrate the magnitude of Napalm burns by comparison.

The present exhibition does not suffer from the excesses of those films. Farocki did not quite end up where Straub (now without Huillet) or Godard have. He devoted his last project, whatever its limitations, to the lives of working people, and they are not presented unsympathetically. But his orientation toward protest politics and the political education he received in those circles left him incapable of treating his subject with the seriousness it deserved.

Ultimately, *Labour in a Single Shot* is not so much a project devoted to working people and casting light on their plight in modern capitalist economies, but rather the technical-formal problem of how best to film them. Among the questions Farocki posed to workshop participants were: "What kinds of labour processes set interesting cinematographic challenges?" and "Almost every form of labour is repetitive. How can one find a beginning and an end when capturing it?"

In an attempt to arrive at an answer, Farocki imposed on himself and dozens of other filmmakers, constraints that were essentially arbitrary and had no organic connection to their material. It all but guaranteed the mishandling of his theme.



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