

## Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe

# Cities and Cultures

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# Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe

*Edited by  
Frances Guerin and  
Magda Szczęśniak*

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# Introduction: Picturing Post-industrialism

Visual Culture and the Regeneration of European  
Landscapes

*Frances Guerin*

## Abstract

The introduction lays out the intellectual terrain for a collection of chapters on *Picturing Post-industrialism*. It offers an overview of the fields of post-industrial studies and articulates the intervention made by the new scholarship featured in the volume. The introduction defines and discusses the historical, aesthetic, and conceptual issues that structure the anthology, and explores the themes that make it cohere.

**Keywords:** post-1970s regeneration; visual culture; post-industrial Europe; community engagement; art for social change

In its time, the nineteenth-century industrial revolution and the enormous changes it enabled to the way that we live and work were enthusiastically embraced. In recent decades, disillusionment has grown in line with the catastrophic consequences of the industrial way of life. Despite starting to be dismantled over fifty years ago, the upheavals resulting from the closing of mines and heavy industry in Europe, including their removal to developing countries since the 1970s, continue to contribute to some of the greatest challenges facing Europeans today. These include (un)employment and segmentation of the labour market, demographic changes in patterns of ageing, migration, austerity, growing poverty, climate change, and environmental sustainability. The consequences of the cultural, economic, and social shifts to a period of post-industrialization weigh heavily on daily life in Europe today.

Since the 1970s, many of Europe's one-time thriving industrial landscapes have been de-industrialized, mining and heavy industry have wound down, commodity production declined, or become refocused on non-fossil-fuelled production and manufacturing. There is no single European experience of the transformation from the industrial to post-industrial age. Similarly, revitalization, dereliction, or destruction of once thriving hubs of industrial activity across Europe have depended on a range of factors, including national and regional government policies, geographical and social context, and demographic identity. Abandoned and demolished factories, powerplants, blast furnaces, and reactors litter Europe's former industrial heartlands. Thus, for example, the IKA cable-manufacturing plant in Köpenick, Berlin or the Hunedoara Ironworks in Romania—once the biggest iron foundry in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—have lain derelict and abandoned for years.<sup>1</sup> Such spaces attract stray cats, graffiti artists, and drug dealers, apparently devaluing their environs. In other locations, industrial sites have been transformed to meet the changing needs of consumer societies. For example, the renowned Lingotto building of the Fiat manufacturing plant in Turin has been transformed into a commercial complex. Visitors can follow the former car production line and take the elevator to the roof to the racetrack where cars were once tested.

Still other sites, such as those in Germany's Ruhr region, have benefited from the European Union's incentives for structural change and development, resulting in physical regeneration and economic revitalization. In such areas, former industrial facilities have been transformed into museum-style complexes where locals and visitors are encouraged to experience the past through present activities such as walking, playing, spectating, and learning.<sup>2</sup> Thus, from the outset, the material contours of Europe's post-industrial landscapes are varied and uneven.

That said, the social challenges for post-industrial regions across Europe are strikingly similar. In the immediate aftermath of the closure of mines and manufacturing, the goals were to ensure social inclusion, clean contaminated areas, build new economies, create employment, and revitalize structures and landscapes. Today, European funding policies continue to privilege the search for environmental sustainability to mitigate the effects of the climate

1 Anca Pusca, "Industrial and Human Ruins of Postcommunist Europe," *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3 (July 2010): 2398–455; A.-D. Muntean, "The Brownfields of Hunedoara: Magnets without a Force of Attraction," *Risks and Catastrophes Journal* 26, no. 1 (March 2003): 95–107.

2 See Geraldine Gardner, "The View from Europe," in *Remaking Post-Industrial Cities: Lessons from North America and Europe*, ed. Donald K. Carter (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 127–36.

catastrophe. They are also focused on integrating otherwise marginalized communities into the global economy.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, this has meant a shift in public policy (and funding) towards education, creative production, and technological development. Thus, the twin strategies for creating new economies and developing the workforce to meet such strategies have become the focus of ongoing policy decisions.

When considering the myriad approaches to the industrial past and its legacies across Europe broadly defined, it is important not to assume that revitalization is always a welcome alternative to dereliction and abandonment. Europe's former industrialized landscapes, sites, and structures are often redeveloped for local and tourist consumerism—malls, hotels, leisure centres—and other spaces have been transformed into apartments, offices, and museums to display local and regional history. These transformations are typically designed to stimulate the economy by attracting visitors from outside the area. Most often, they have become places for tourists or bourgeois living, working, and relaxing.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they have been gentrified. Scholars agree that such apparently dynamic cultural heritage solutions can erase or hide the trauma of lives lost to mines and factories, harsh living and working conditions of the past, and the ongoing challenges of the working classes today.<sup>5</sup> Together with the loss of the structures and mechanisms of work and industry that once animated these sites, regeneration for the tourist industry and gentrification in its various forms literally displaces people from their homes and the places to which their identity is tied. With erasure or regeneration, the complex experiences of the industrial past for local communities, and the historical richness of individual, local, and regional identity in the present, are made invisible. The demolishing of warehouses on Union Street, Belfast to make way for commercial sites and the transformation of the Lingotto building in Turin are as alienating as the above-mentioned abandonment of the Hunedoara Ironworks and IKA cable-manufacturing plant.<sup>6</sup>

3 On the European mission for “climate neutral” and “smart cities” under the auspices of the 2050 European Green Deal, see “The European Green Deal,” accessed April 11, 2023, <https://europeanclimate.org/the-european-green-deal/>.

4 Also common is the transformation of structures into high-end warehouse living—the “original” features of visible steel girders, pylons, and open floor spaces add attraction to the “authentic” industrial living experience. See, Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

5 The material on this issue is vast. Some examples include: Chiara De Cesari and Rozita Dimova, “Heritage, Gentrification, Participation: Remaking Urban Landscapes in the Name of Culture and Historic Preservation,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 9 (2019): 863–69.

6 Pusca, “Industrial and Human Ruins”; Muntean, “The Brownfields of Hunedoara.”

This is not to say that the official / community response can be cast as a bad / good dichotomy. Like the destruction of otherwise unsightly industrial facilities, the ramifications of revitalization are complicated; restored and replaced buildings may witness the disenfranchisement dealt by gentrification, but they can simultaneously function as meeting places, and educational and cultural centres frequented by local residents. Moreover, they may be erected specifically with a view to connect local visitors to the manufacturing or mining past.

For example, in Campina and Ploiești in Romania, decline in the oil and gas industries has paved the way for education and research institutions that use former oil wells as research laboratories.<sup>7</sup> In addition, for cities that cannot rely on restoration or redevelopment, urban decay and shrinkage leads to diminishing populations. This, in turn, means that the cities' future survival is at stake. As urban planners and architects attest, intervention for the sustenance of "shrinking cities" is vital for their populations, whatever form it takes.<sup>8</sup> Local councils, heritage groups, residents, and urban planners across Europe have responded to the threats to shrinking cities by engaging in multilayered, often protracted discussions with all parties to find the best solutions for the particular concerns of each.<sup>9</sup> And, in some cases, these discussions have resulted in demolition and rebuilding for leisure and commercial activities. Of course, there are always shortcomings and inadequacies in the official responses. Nevertheless, as editors, we believe that we are at a juncture in the study of post-industrial transformation where the multidimensional possibilities of these solutions must be appreciated. Put differently, there is no doubt that gentrification has proven detrimental for poorer and working-class residents. In addition to ostracizing local communities by introducing bourgeois shopping, leisure, and living spaces, it invariably displaces former workers and local residents from their living spaces. The appropriation or demolition of public and affordable housing in

7 Jonathan Craig, Francesco Gerali, Fiona MacAulay, and Rasoul Sorkhabi, "The History of the European Oil and Gas Industry (1600s–2000s)," *Geological Society*, Special Publications 465 (June 21, 2018): 1–24. See also, Katarzyna Jagodzińska, *Museums and Centers of Contemporary Art in Central Europe after 1989*, trans. Carolyn C. Guile (London: Routledge, 2019), Introduction.

8 Beatriz Fernández Agueda, "Urban Restructuring in Former Industrial Cities: Urban Planning Strategies / Le renouvellement urbain des villes industrielles. Stratégies d'aménagement," *Territoire en Mouvement*, no. 23–24 (2014), accessed August 22, 2022, <https://journals.openedition.org/tem/2527>. Initial work on "Shrinking Cities" and the possible ways of redevelopment was done in a German government-funded research project. See Philipp Oswalt, ed., *Shrinking Cities: International Research* (Virginia: DAP, 2010).

9 See Special Issue of *Urban Design International* on *Shrinking Cities and Towns: Challenge and Responses* 18, no. 1 (2018).

the interests of gentrification necessitates moving out of city centres and, at times, requires relocation to affordable cities elsewhere. In turn, this can lead to isolation, stigmatization, and with them, a host of social and health issues. However, to reiterate, as editors, we believe in the imperative to acknowledge that the consequences of gentrification across European countries are not one-dimensional.

In Northern and Western Europe, government institutions, independent policymakers, and civic groups have begun to address the social issues arising from de-industrialization, declining and redefined industrialization. They have sought to preserve the past in memory with a view to creating future mitigation of the social challenges such as the displacement, dispossession, ageing, and unemployment of one-time industrial communities. Within the academy, geographers, social historians, urban planners, architects, anthropologists, economists, and sociologists have attended to the ongoing challenges of post-industrial regions in their multiple stages of revivification.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, art and visual culture have been commissioned as the basis of geographical and social redefinition across these European post-industrial landscapes and communities.

While artists and image-makers continue to produce varied and multiple visual representations of processes of de-industrialization and the post-industrial condition, these have not yet been fully analysed within art history, film studies, visual studies, and related disciplines. Scholarship has not given sustained critical attention to the role of art and visual culture in Europe's processes of regeneration.<sup>11</sup> This is despite the centrality of visual culture to successful revitalization and, in some cases, its complicity in gentrification. Similarly, art and visual culture have repeatedly been used as vehicles for creating community, visibility, and acceptance for those affected by industrialization and the subsequent shifts to new economies. Whatever their role in the variety of European processes of regeneration, the

10 Hilary Orange, *Reanimating Industrial Spaces: Conducting Memory Work in Post-Industrial Societies* (London: Routledge, 2014).

11 Notable exceptions here include Gwen Heeney's *The Post-Industrial Landscape as Site for Creative Practice: Material Memory* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2017). Orange, *Reanimating Industrial Spaces*, focuses primarily on sites of memory, including a chapter on the heritage site as museum. The *Topographies of the Obsolete* project (2012–16), housed at the University of Bergen, examined and exhibited a wide range of artistic responses to the European post-industrial moment, primarily in Scandinavia and the UK. Accessed August 22, 2022, <http://topographies.uib.no/index.html>. In a broader context, Brian Dillon's exhibition at Tate Modern: Brian Dillon, *Ruin Lust*. London: Tate, 2014. Other books address questions of visual culture in selected chapters. See, for example, Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, eds., *Ruins of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

paucity of scholarship devoted to art and visual culture in post-industrial transformation projects has led to a disconnect between the intentions, understanding, and reception of relevant projects. The chapters in *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* begin to address some of these lacunae. Moreover, as a collection, *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* seeks to confront the hesitancy to harness existing resources—explored through art and visual culture projects—for enabling greater social integration within, and communication across Europe's post-industrial communities.

Within the multidisciplinary literature of post-industrialism, individual studies examine the fallout from dismantling Europe's heavy industry in specific regions, usually demarcated geographically. These valuable studies of art and visual cultural efforts to regenerate sites, often making visible identities that have been marginalized, forgotten, or deliberately erased through official regeneration in countries such as Britain, Germany, or Northern Ireland usually show reverberations across national regions. However, as of the writing of this introduction, there is no existing collection that brings together analyses of the breadth of responses from artists and visual practitioners to the decline, regeneration, and revivification *across* European regions. This is despite the remarkable resonance between art and visual culture created, installed, exhibited, and performed across Europe's one-time thriving industrial heartlands. The contributions to *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* demonstrate the surprising connections between the use of art and visual culture in regions that have otherwise varied times, scales, and processes of the move away from heavy industry thanks to diverse political, ideological, and historical contexts. Thus, while in Central and Eastern European countries such as Albania, Poland, and former Yugoslav countries, for example, the transformations often went hand in hand with the shift away from state socialism, the art and visual culture is strikingly consistent in its concerns—if not in its aesthetic, form, or execution—with that shown in Germany and Britain. Across Europe, art and visual culture responds to the call to historicize the time and place of industry, maintain memory of the industrial past, and strive for the visibility and integration of former and current workers.

The chapters collected here focus on art and visual culture at distant and diverse sites. These include the former coal and steel production plants in Germany, shipyards in Poland, France, England, and Germany, coal mining in Germany, metal workshops in Croatia, textile factories in Albania and other Eastern European cities, small goods (paper and furniture) factories in the former Soviet Union and Albania. The contributions to *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* examine art and visual culture at a selection of

European sites for their aesthetic, historical, and sociological significance, often as articulations of the challenges and injustices that have come with regeneration and processes of rearticulation. In turn, many of these efforts are dependent on the unique characteristics of their medium for their meaning and impact. Thus, for example, Ana Grgić speaks of the cinema's ability to transgress time to stir and solidify memories of the often contradictory past for former workers in contemporary Balkan cinemas. Alternatively, Dimitra Gkitsa discusses how live performance connects the narratives of the past with the present everyday lives of former workers in a textile factory in Tirana, Albania. Anna Arutyunyan and Andrey Egorov demonstrate how site-specific installations recreate sensuous memories of industry in a former Moscow paper factory.

In addition to chapters that analyse images produced in and at sites of former industry, a second vein of inquiry attends to the public picturing of industrial and post-industrial spaces in the conventional media, advertising, and disciplinary journals. Contributions by Jacob Stewart-Halevy, Julianna Yat Shun Kei, and Nicolas Verschueren consider art and images which shape the public imaginary, particularly during the later decades of the twentieth century, years of declining industry and the post-Second World War transitions to knowledge, technology, and service-based economies. Thus, these chapters represent images distinct from the government or officially sanctioned discourses that, nevertheless, are neither grassroots, and nor do they speak on behalf of labour. They typically represent the voice of an intellectual elite from the middle-class West, looking to identify the radical potential of a visual landscape in transition, or resulting from transformation.

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*Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* grew out of a 2018 conversation between myself and Magda Szcześniak who was working on recent exhibitions of visual culture at the Gdańsk Shipyard. At the time, I was thinking about the Ruhr region's transformation from grey to blue skies, brown to green fields through the installation and exhibition of art and visual culture. The Ruhr region in Germany is the poster version of European revitalization and transformation thanks to the generous financial support of the North Rhine Westfalen, German, and European governments.<sup>12</sup> At a

12 Since the 1980s, the Ruhr landscape has not only become covered in art, but former workers have been paid generous retirement packages, and mines and mills gradually revitalized into

seminar held at the Norwegian Cultural Institute in Paris, Magda offered insight into the very different challenges posed by Gdańsk's transformation from industrial to post-industrial landscape primarily because of Poland's political history. In addition, the conflicts and tensions arising from the maintenance of industrial activities in Gdańsk, a continuation that has characterized many of Europe's former industrial heartlands, pointed to a strikingly different post-industrial landscape from that of Germany's Ruhr region. Nevertheless, Magda revealed how these challenges were also being addressed through performances, installations, and visual cultural events. Thus, in both locations, art and visual culture were being marshalled as vehicles for representation, reflection, and reintegration of the industrial past. This, despite the distinctions fuelled by the shift to post-socialism as opposed to fast-track capitalist regeneration, or the role of the Solidarity movement in the closing of the shipyard as opposed to the 1974 demonstrations in Germany. These curious resonances in the use of the visual across diverse instances of post-industrial transformation sowed the seeds of *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe*.

As our conversation broadened and deepened over the ensuing years, we kept coming back to the similarities and shared interests of art and visual culture's relationship to post-industrial revitalization. Despite the historical, ideological, and geographical uniqueness of various regions across the continent, the art and visual culture of post-industrial Europe consistently and continually communicates the experiences of local communities, people who have become disenfranchised and stigmatized following the closing of mines, mills, and other heavy industry. Thus, we were inspired to bring these concerns together, to debate the powerful ways that art and visual culture have become central to making sense of the transformations.

This is a book about what transpires when people work together with art and visual culture to speak about their situation, to open spaces of dispute, deliberation, and to search for meaning in the uniqueness of their individual and collective experiences. Thus, while the collection began as a conversation between Magda and me, without the contributors, this ongoing dialogue across European borders could not exist. We are indebted to the contributors for their commitment and belief in the project, and to their chapters that have transformed our initial ideas into a rich and insightful intellectual publication.

museums displaying local history have become accessible cultural centres, welcoming community engagement.



## Official Regeneration and Grassroots Art and Visual Culture

From the first signs of decline in European heavy industry in the wake of the Second World War, the places and spaces of industry have been refurbished to house modern and contemporary art collections. Across cities in Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Italy, Spain, and Poland, flour mills, paper mills, mines, abattoirs, metal and car factories, to name a few, have been turned into art museums and cultural centres. Thus, to give an obvious example, the conversion of a former power station into Tate Modern in Britain sees the museum at the centre of a thriving, energetic arts and cultural scene along London's South Bank. While leisure was the intended use of such developments, tourism and capitalist consumption were the primary motivators for the refurbishments. In another example, the original structure of El Matadero, a former pig slaughterhouse in central Madrid, is now home to experimental arts and culture. The building includes workshops, produce and clothing markets, cinema, and performance spaces, all of which offer free entry to locals. Tourists do visit El Matadero, but it is primarily a complex that has been turned back to the local community.

Such projects have developed concurrent with, even if they were not funded by annual bids for European Capital of Culture, an initiative launched in 1985 by the European Commission. In the nascent and ongoing competitions, the designation of European Capital of Culture is awarded to cities to enable strengthened cultural and creative sectors, as well as to forge long-term links with the surrounding economic and social life. Accordingly, the designation comes with an opportunity to: regenerate; raise the international profile of the city; enhance the image of the city in the eyes of its own inhabitants; breathe new life into a city's culture; and boost tourism.<sup>13</sup> While in its earliest iterations, the successful European Capitals of Culture were major cities such as Athens and Paris, since the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of small and mid-sized former industrial hubs have worn the logo.<sup>14</sup> Thus, at the highest levels of government policy, art and visual culture are playing a pivotal role in Europe's drive to regenerate and redevelop following industrial decline in the second half of the twentieth century.

13 The guidelines for applications to the European Capital of Culture can be found on the EU's website, accessed September 15, 2022, [https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/capitals-culture-candidates-guide\\_en\\_vdec17.pdf](https://culture.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/capitals-culture-candidates-guide_en_vdec17.pdf).

14 For a list of chosen cities since its inception in 1985, see the policy pages, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/policies/culture-in-cities-and-regions/designated-capitals-of-culture>.

Several chapters in *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* reflect on regeneration efforts that have unfolded under the aegis of the European Capital of Culture in Essen, Marseille, Glasgow, and Brussels. Even when it is not directly visible, the initiative has been instrumental to the integration of art and visual culture into the ongoing life of Europe's former industrial cities. As chapters reveal, the ramifications of art and cultural projects pursued with the blessing of the European Commission have been mixed. The designation of Capital of Culture which theoretically comes with improvement of material infrastructure and enhancement of cultural life, has meant the erasure of the unsightly, the dangerous, and the dark elements of industrial spaces. In addition, increased employment in preparation for the celebrations has given way to redundancy. In reality, for cities/conurbations such as Maribor (2012) or Matera (2019), the award was a gateway to gentrification. Thus, while unintended, accelerated urban regeneration and a transformation of history into an economic resource in Europe's cultural capitals have a potential to marginalize further the diversity in culture and language.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a successful application to become a Capital of Culture does nothing to address the challenges of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion in these towns and cities as realization is typically in the city centres.<sup>16</sup>

Chapters in *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* also consider redefinitions of industry into leisure through art and visual culture as it has been inspired by a range of initiatives. Thus, government, policymaker, and investor attempts to revitalize landscapes, reanimate communities, and address the pressing results of post-industrial fallout through art and culture—such as designation of European Capital of Culture—are investigated alongside civic and individually inspired projects. The latter genre of work has often been designed simultaneously to supplement, comment on, criticize, and/or re-vision official programmes, unfolding on the literal and symbolic margins of gentrification.

15 Scholars also discuss the problems in a place such as Matera that, as a consequence of its cultural capital, now suffers from “over tourism.” See, for example, Nicolaia Iaffaldano, Sonia Ferrari, and Giovanni Padula, “Sustainable Accommodation in a Fragile Tourist Destination: The Matera Case,” in *Tourism in the Mediterranean Sea: An Italian Perspective*, ed. Filippo Grasso and Bruno S. Sergi (Bingley: Emerald, 2021), 167–84.

16 See, for example, *European Planning Studies* 30, no. 3 (2022), Special Issue on *Cultural Mega-Events and Heritage: Challenges for European Cities*. The diverse impact of ECC legacy can be seen in articles by Joanna Sanetra-Szeliga, “Culture and Heritage as a Means to Foster Quality of Life? The Case of Wrocław European Capital of Culture 2016,” 514–33; and Tamara West, “Liverpool's European Capital of Culture Legacy Narrative: A Selective Heritage?,” 534–53.

Given the strain of regeneration that has been carried out through official channels, collectively, the chapters in *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* establish an otherwise invisible tension. The art and visual cultural works are predominantly grassroots, locally inspired, creative projects. Many are on the edges, either literally occupying the outskirts of metropolitan areas where industrial complexes once stood, or symbolically, through their desire to question mainstream history. Even when the works are commissioned by government bodies, as several contributors show, artists sometimes assume, or embrace, the responsibility to challenge the official vision. In some cases, the bottom-up strategies for art and visual cultural projects are placed side by side with those of official representations and commissions. Alternatively, contributions present and examine the visual representations of interested intellectual outsiders who opine on the significance of industry, its decline, and the concomitant emergence of wastelands and alienated workers lying at the centre of local communities.

As a marker of their spirit of questioning and resistance, the best of the art, film, sculpture, installation, and other visual cultural projects here discussed typically imagine the uneven, contradictory, and troubled transitions to and fallout of post-industrialization. Alternatively, they represent the struggles commonly facing individuals and communities in the post-industrial, or de-industrializing present. As mentioned, typically, government and investor-fuelled regeneration projects tend to make invisible the work, labour, and production of the past. Similarly, they can cover up the ecological spoils and social devastation of communities living in the wake of de-industrialization, or post-industrial transformation in the service of consumer and technological economies. *Visual Culture of Post-Industrial Europe* investigates artistic initiatives that make the industrial past visible, negotiable, and re-imaginable in the wake of closures, unemployment, diminished social services, and shattered identities across Europe.

While terms such as “de-industrialization” and “post-industrialization” flatten out the contours of the processes in question, grassroots art and visual culture have been committed to representing and reanimating, interrogating, and revisioning the scale, substance, and consequences of specific, often complex processes. In addition, as individual chapters demonstrate, certain instances of visual culture have been instrumental in recognizing the impact of de-industrialization on all areas of public life: social, economic, political, historical, and environmental. Nevertheless, the particular focus on making visible raises an unstated problem or contradiction that is waiting to be explored and analysed. Namely, the question of why it is necessary to hide the industrial past, and specifically, to hide

the consequences of de-industrialization by rendering one-time workers invisible. Particularly in Europe's former Eastern states, the question of how to support those who populated the industrial era, together with their histories, has become a thorn in the side of regeneration efforts. Thus, this demographic is often banished or made invisible in developing urbanscapes. It seems too easy to claim that their presence is a reminder of the failures of the past—though this is surely part of the reason for their material and ideological effacement. While such questions remain unanswered within the chapters, their continued relevance points to the fact that the transitions to post-industrialism have not always been successful and the work of social integration is far from complete.

## Ruin Porn

Scholars have called the solutions for decayed ruins pursued by governments and investors as “ruin porn.” Specifically, the term has been used to describe factories and industrial facilities that have been renovated to retain parts of old structures, but most importantly, to be aesthetically spectacular. The term ruin porn was coined in response to turn-of-the-twenty-first-century photographic books of dilapidated Detroit landmarks made stunningly beautiful. The photographs thus transformed the material remnants of decades of social, economic, and political processes into fetishized objects. Dora Apel gives a compelling account of this aestheticization of Detroit's landmarks, the fascination and desire to aestheticize works in direct contrast to appropriation of abandoned and marginalized spaces for community activities, such as graffiti, concerts, and garden allotments.<sup>17</sup> Over the past two decades, the ruin porn label has expanded its reach from the specifics of photographs that capture and flatten out material history into descriptions of superficial images offered for visual consumption.<sup>18</sup> In recent years, the term has been used to describe the transformation of former mines, mills, and other sites of heavy industry into sublime and iconic monuments to the

17 Dora Apel, *Beautiful, Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015). See also Tanya Whitehouse, *How Ruins Acquire Aesthetic Value: Modern Ruins, Ruin Porn, and the Ruin Tradition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). For a compelling discussion of ways that various sites of abandonment and ruin have been appropriated in the Baltic Sea Region, see Anna Storm's, *Post-Industrial Landscape Scars* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

18 See also, the excellent chapters collected in, Siobhan Lyons, ed., *Ruin Porn, Capitalism, and the Anthropocene* (London: Palgrave, 2018).

glorious days of modernity, thereby ignoring, or worse, erasing, suffering and loss.<sup>19</sup> These structures are typically clean, museum-style landmarks to be visited by the whole family. By day, people often picnic and cycle in the grounds, and by night, enjoy a concert with a colourful, floodlit former factory as backdrop.

The pornography metaphor of ruin porn also emphasizes the privileged standpoint of the bourgeois visitor to these sites. The demographic reality of such visitors sets them at a distance not just from the historical processes of industry and its decline, but the poverty and displacement of those who once worked there. As Paul Mullins, one of ruin porn's earliest critics, points out, "ruin porn' borrows from a long-established tradition of slum tourism by White bourgeois that swept Europe and America in the late 19th century."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the visitor who takes photographs of the once thriving, now derelict, abandoned cathedrals of modernity, objectifies their beauty.<sup>21</sup> The buildings and their photographic representation are thus interpreted to offer uncritical celebrations of the past, romanticizing or erasing working-class struggle and suffering. Thus, similar to the fate of the trajectory of Western industrialization, working-class people themselves become conveniently inserted into the natural and inevitable order of birth-thrive-decline. In yet another unacknowledged contradiction, this ascription conveniently relieves the need to address the impoverishment and displacement of former workers.

Since the initial critiques of ruin porn photography, visual studies have offered more nuanced accounts, and more measured interpretations of such aestheticization of industry.<sup>22</sup> Tim Strangleman, for example, points out the importance of abandoned ruins for workers and locals, reminding his reader that there are many ways to interact with the abandoned

19 See Storm, *Post-Industrial Landscape Scars*; Tracy Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

20 John Patrick Leahy offers one of the first critiques of "ruin porn" in his review of photography books of Detroit. See [https://www.guernicamag.com/leary\\_1\\_15\\_11/](https://www.guernicamag.com/leary_1_15_11/). Paul Mullins's blog has attracted attention for its critique of ruin porn and the connection to racism and colonialism, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://paulmullins.wordpress.com/2012/08/19/the-politics-and-archaeology-of-ruin-porn/>. Steven High discusses these tensions at a more substantial level in Steven High and David W. Lewis, eds., *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

21 In 2014, Tate Britain staged an exhibition showing artists' visual and emotional fascination from the eighteenth century to today. See Dillon, *Ruin Lust*.

22 Tim Strangleman, "Smokestack Nostalgia, Ruin Porn, or Working Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 23–37, 30; Steven High, "Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 140–53.

ruin. In particular, when images are seen in collaboration with text and oral memory, they can lead to provocative and stimulating discussion. Alternatively, in her sophisticated account of ruin porn, Siobhan Lyons argues that it “potentially signals the demise of capitalism while challenging the anthropocentric discourse that defines contemporary academic discussions.”<sup>23</sup> As both Strangleman and Lyons imply, there is a very thin line between aestheticization for the sake of visual spectacle and for the purpose of attracting tourism. As Strangleman’s examination of images of work from the now closed Guinness Brewery in West London shows, officially commissioned works of visual culture can both revitalize a site landscape and have a cathartic impact for locals and workers struggling to celebrate their memories of the past, while simultaneously, giving outsiders insight into the processes of industry.<sup>24</sup> The aestheticization of industry can also draw visitors to former industrial sites, and thus, educate and create compassion and solidarity. Alternatively, as Bjørnar Olsen & Þóra Pétursdóttir in their counter criticisms argue, ruin aestheticization can also teach lessons about the benefits of using photographic and other media to document material history.

Some contributors to *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe* engage with the aestheticization of and longing for the industrial past, if not directly, by implication or association. Discourses on ruin porn and its ideological significances underlie their response. For example, Juliana Yat Shun Kei points to the contradiction between, on the one hand, the British journal *The Architectural Review*’s desire to annex nineteenth-century structures for preservation, and on the other, to claim their obsolescence. She sees this contradiction as resonating with the attempt to aestheticize industrial structures. Alternatively, Lachlan MacKinnon’s account of ephemeral and non-commissioned art in and around the contemporary Belfast docks follows the critical line those early scholars took towards aestheticization of photographs of decayed Detroit.

The contributions to *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe* deal with the pictorial illustration of past material history in images and objects that actively seek to raise rather than mute workers’ voices, make visible past histories, and integrate these into an ever-changing present. In keeping with work that looks to the unevenness within pictures of former industrial

23 Siobhan Lyons, “Introduction: Ruin Porn, Capitalism and the Anthropocene,” in Lyons, *Ruin Porn*, 1.

24 Tim Strangleman, “Picturing Work in an Industrial Landscape: Visualizing Labour, Place and Space,” *Sociological Research Online* 17, no. 2 (2012): 1–13.

processes, the collection acknowledges the forms of social oppression and marginalization that result from effectively hiding the past through aestheticization of the former workplace. Simultaneously, the contributors remain aware that these efforts can be crucial to supporting and healing industrial workers whose experience of belonging may still be tied to their former identity. Thus, individual chapters insist on remembering that the work of engaging with *how* to represent the industrial past and its memories is still open to debate and discussion.<sup>25</sup>

### Art and Visual Culture Make Visible

Whether it be film, comics, design, or installation, many examples of art and visual culture discussed in these pages are not intended for exhibition in museums or private galleries. Often the works are created as a social tool, looking to facilitate cultural animation and exchange. The images and objects are designed to raise voices, thus enabling otherwise silenced people and their erased histories to become audible and visible. The works are also intended to break down social stereotypes, often inviting locals, including former workers, to celebrate their environment, to participate in its definition and redefinition. The works are typically exhibited and experienced outside the market in which art is often removed from the reality of everyday life. Indeed, the art and visual culture shines a light on the quotidian dimension of the post-industrial condition, exposing its inequalities, and proposing new ways of seeing.

Tim Edensor discusses industrial ruins as sites with the potential to question normative regimes of memory and materiality and bourgeois middle-class narratives of stability through progress.<sup>26</sup> Following the logic of Edensor's claim, art and visual culture bring these sites and their complex histories into visibility. Indeed, a sentiment of anarchy drives many of these practices, creating spaces for voices to be heard within an oligarchy of government, private and public investors. Further to Edensor's belief, the examples explored in these chapters aim to weave the authentic memories and experiences of industrial communities and individual participants back

25 Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir, "Imaging Modern Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography," *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1, no. 1 (2014): 7–56. See also the essays collected in Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir, eds., *Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past* (London: Routledge, 2014).

26 Tim Edensor, "Waste Matter – The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World," *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 311–32.

into the urban fabric. Thus, art and visual culture can have a restorative function as it poses alternative histories.

Art and visual culture may not always bring change and revolution, but they have the capacity to give voice to the silenced, to change people's lives. In addition, many of the artworks and visual cultural examples engage with the space of work that has now been transformed into a space of investment, housing, leisure, commerce. In such cases, the workplace is transformed into a space from which one-time owners, workers, and inhabitants have become excluded. Art puts the past and the people who occupied it, built it, worked it, back at the centre of the spaces of industry. In this sense, art and visual culture typically use the spaces and places of industry and transform them, not just as mausoleums to house the past, but also as inspiration for new meaning in the present.

## Themes and Concerns

Fittingly, ruins lead us to the primary themes and concerns of *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe*. My hesitance to outright dismiss images of ruins for their classist, racist, and ideologically motivated nostalgia or spectacle is born of the centuries' old conception of images of ruins.<sup>27</sup> As twentieth-century theorists of analogue photography from Siegfried Kracauer to Roland Barthes have argued, the photograph fixes the past, but it also activates the imagination, enabling the viewer to bring the past into the present.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, as more recent photography theorists have argued, the photograph has the capacity to create community, to connect people, to shape relationships.<sup>29</sup> While only a handful of chapters examine the photograph as document or object, the discussions always look at the image to give insight into the present moment. Such images may remove contradictions from the landscape of ruin when beauty hides social disharmony and smooths over the destruction that comes hand in hand with ruin.<sup>30</sup>

27 I think here of the prison sketches of Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

28 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Classics, 1993).

29 Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). The groundbreaking study here is the work of Ariella Azoulay on the use of photographs in communities on the West Bank. See, Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (London: Zone Books, 2012).

30 For a sophisticated account of the phenomenon of ruins made spectacular, see Miles Orvell, *Empire of Ruins: American Culture, Photography, and the Spectacle of Destruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).



The (now absent) past is seen with sentimentality as a time of productivity and wellbeing. In our historical moment, when images and history are being elided, the fragmentation and ambiguity of images discussed in these chapters can provoke a reflection on the present moment of their reception. The aesthetic strategies discussed by contributors reinstate the historical power of the ruin and the pasts that they carry with them. In works as diverse as the factory in Albania and the landscaped gardens of Thyssen Krupp's former mine in North Duisburg, the structure of the ruin is key to the memory of the past lived therein. Therefore, we might appreciate what can be called the authentic power of the ruin being discovered by the image, countering the absolute iconic longing and desire that is imbued in ruins and their representation of the past. It is the intention of the *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe* that such images and visual objects act as doorways to a more complex understanding of a need to continue to process the past in the present moment.

The images discussed in this volume open the discourse, rather than close it down as would be the case with ruin porn. Even when the authors do not overtly address the politics and ideology of the image, they reinforce the fact that the work of memory is not yet done. Bringing the past into the present, remembering the authenticity of past experiences is the necessary work of images and visual culture in our current climate of forgetting.

### Time and Temporality

Regenerated one-time industrial spaces take on diverse and often fluid relationships to time. Leaning on Reinhart Kosellek's notion of layers of time, Kerstin Brandt discusses the fluidity resulting from the memory work done when interacting with industrial ruins.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, time does not function linearly in these spaces, but rather, reaches back to the past in the present moment of the visit, for varied durations. In so doing, a panoply of temporally shifting relations to a site emerges. For Brandt, the multiple temporal layers coexisting in the Thyssen Krupp steelworks in North Duisburg begin with the undulations of German history witnessed over the lifetime of the steelworks: the reclaiming of the land in the nineteenth century, the Fordist success story of the steelworks in the early twentieth century, world wars, divided Germany, the 1990s architectural renovation,

31 Kerstin Brandt, "Memory Traces of an Abandoned Set of Futures: Industrial Ruins in the Postindustrial Landscapes of Germany," in Hell and Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*, 270–93.

and today's ongoing evolution of the nature park through rewilding. Each of these histories is, in turn, modulated by the time of the visitor—both when and for how long they visit—and their pre-existing relationship to the site as former worker, family, visitor, or tourist. In addition, their changing perspectives will influence the stories they discover at the industrial ruin. Each of the sites discussed in *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe* is a palimpsest of multiple, shifting temporalities, keeping the past alive in the present beyond the lives of those who once worked there.

There are additional temporalities brought together within these pages. Namely, the differing times and rates of decline and de-industrialization. In Britain, deep coal mining began its contraction when the Thatcher government closed the mines in 1984, whereas Poland and Russia continue to mine coal to this day. Similarly, manufacturing companies in Northern Europe began moving to China at different stages from the 1970s thanks to a larger and cheaper workforce. However, as contributions by Ognjen Kojanić and Szcześniak reference, manufacturing continues across Europe and, in some places, heavy industry still exists. Thus, the past and the present are woven together in everyday European life. In some countries, from the late 1980s onwards, buildings and landscapes began to be turned into archives and museums. Such institutions are driven by the impetus to fossilize the past, while simultaneously pursuing different forms of industrial production in the present. The narratives of museums and archives are often written by those determined to prohibit the past from seeping beyond often arbitrarily determined limits, by putting it in a glass display case to be contained. To give one example, in former Soviet Union cities such as Perm, Omsk, and Novokuznetsk, the past has been filed away, and production diversified in the face of shifting global demands.

In countries such as France, Italy, and Germany many areas of manufacturing continue, but in largely automated form. Thus, light industries such as electronics, home appliances, clothing, and other end user items are produced across Europe. If these production plants employ workers, the demographic is typically from a second generation of immigrants, often from the Global South and poorer countries within Europe.<sup>32</sup> In such cases, even though the dangers associated with this work are not as great as those incurred in mining, shipbuilding, and other heavy industry, this type of transformation effectively repeats the oppression and injustice for a new

32 See, for example, Carol Stephenson, Jon Warren, and Jonathan Wistow, Editorial: "After Industry' the Economic and Social Consequences of Deindustrialization," *Frontiers in Sociology*, March 2021, accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2021.645027/full>.

generation of workers and immigrants. Thus, in contributions by Szcześniak and Gkitsa, the past flows freely into the present, if in a different form, and under different material and economic conditions.

Another set of tensions arising from the multiple and shifting temporalities of the industrial past is that of nostalgia. As contributions by Burns, Arutyunyan and Ergorov, Grgić, and Gkitsa examine, today, many former industrial workers lament what they have lost with the closing of mines and heavy industry facilities. Despite the dangers and difficulty of working life, memories of employment, thus economic stability, purpose, and belonging are often triggered by the sites at which the art and visual culture is displayed, exhibited, or performed. To be clear, this is not a nostalgia of the type discussed by Andreas Huyssen in his critique of the contemporary obsession with ruin culture.<sup>33</sup> If there is a longing for the past, it's not of a specular kind. Neither is it a nostalgia that leads to heritage forms and practices as state-sanctioned histories. Such histories are usually embodied in memorials and statues of war generals, unknown soldiers, heroic figures, or headstones.<sup>34</sup> Rather, the nostalgia witnessed in various chapters of *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe* is ephemeral because it is formed in memory and spontaneous conversation. In addition, it is, as Svetlana Boym has distinguished it, not simply "restorative," but a nuanced and "reflective" form of nostalgia.<sup>35</sup> Thus, there are good and bad memories, pride and solidarity among workers, mixed with reinforcement of the difficulties, repetitiveness of the work, ambivalence, but nevertheless, a recognition of the former factory life.

As Jackie Clarke, quoting Peter Fritzsche argues, "nostalgia is not simply an irrational attempt to turn the clock back [...] but 'raises the spectre of alternative modernities.'"<sup>36</sup> When looking back to the past is raised in these chapters, the authors do not describe a yearning to return to that moment. Rather, once again, the looking back evidences a desire for visibility through the creation of a space for stories to be told and struggles to be brought into

33 Andreas Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room* 23 (Spring 2006): 6–21.

34 See the work of David C. Harvey for a discussion of the intransigence of heritage memorials as opposed to the reality of heritage as a process. David C Harvey, *Commemorative Spaces of the First World War: Historical Geography at the Centenary*, edited with James Wallis (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), and "Critical Heritage Debates and the Commemoration of the First World War: Productive Nostalgia and Discourses of Respectful Reverence," in *Heritage in Action: Making the Past in the Present*, ed. Helaine Silverman, Emma Waterton, and Steve Watson (New York: Springer, 2017), 107–20.

35 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

36 Jackie Clarke, "Closing Time: Deindustrialization and Nostalgia in Contemporary France," *History Workshop Journal* 79 (Spring 2015): 107–25, 119.

the light. Kojanić's discussion of a mural at ITAS metal factory in Croatia is also indicative of the ongoing effort of workers to be in control of their own lives and work when faced with owners who want to erase their voices altogether by brushing them under the carpet through "heritage solutions." The mural is, as David C. Harvey calls for, a form of memory that keeps the past alive, and simultaneously, keeps the present multilayered.

As Gkitsa's discussion of performance pieces in the Tirana textile factory also shows, of great significance to the participants who create memories through art is the fact that we are approaching a time when the next generation will not remember the history of their cities' industrialist pasts. The young are more connected to the consumerist present than they are to the production and ideologies of the past. Thus, there are generational tensions and gaps that have arisen where art and visual culture have been unsuccessful because the next generation do not have the visual literacy to understand the image or its perspective on the past.<sup>37</sup> Rather than seeing these instances as failures of images and culture to heal the wounds of the past, they are moments of challenge and future possibility.

## Space and Location

Inseparable from the fluidity of time and memory at former industrial sites now transformed into spaces of exhibition, stages for performance, or subjects of display is the constantly changing identity of the spaces themselves. As Edensor says, and we instinctively know, the industrial ruin is not a static object, but is always changing across time and space, giving way to an emphatic ephemerality thanks to the unpredictability of the visitor's motion.<sup>38</sup> Thus, as mentioned, film proves an ideal medium to examine the ephemerality of the industrial site across time as seen in contributions by Gabriel Gee and Grgić. In addition, other chapters show how industrial space as a memorial transforms over time, both materially and in memory. Whether this is through rewilding at sites such as North Duisburg's former Thyssen Krupp mines (Guerin), the decay and dilapidation of the Belfast Lower Falls' community housing (Burns), or the ongoing developments at the Gdańsk Shipyard (Szcześniak), time wears away at space. Again, individual chapters show how art and visual culture have harnessed this

<sup>37</sup> Orange, *Reanimating Industrial Spaces*.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Edensor, "Walking through Ruins," in *Industrial Ruins: Spaces, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 123–41.

corrosion of space as a site of possibility. The unformed and unfinished, like the ruin, is open to different perspectives of its infinite layers. The future is not yet fixed.<sup>39</sup>

Equally layered in the lifespan of industrial activity is its occupation, thus, definition of space and its alternation in the post-industrial moment. Typically, though not always, industrial production took place on the margins of towns and cities. In the industrial heyday, workers lived in communities proximate to these peripheral locations. Today, especially if the areas have not been revitalized, these can be difficult to access, considered ugly, and risky to visit.<sup>40</sup> Sites such as nuclear power plants built in the immediate post-war period and brownfields still covered in slag heaps have been placed out of bounds because of poorly handled hazardous waste. Alternatively, these spaces have simply become invisible, buried beneath the constructions of new centres of residence, commerce, and culture for the new economies.

As discussed in my chapter on the Meiderich complex, the peripheral location of former industrial sites makes them consistent with what Michel Foucault termed “other spaces.” They are dislocated from present-day city living, and thus, mark a contradictory site where temporality is unpredictable, where ideologies collide, and institutions can never be certain of their power. Among the most interesting industrial sites as multilayered spaces are those in the centre of cities. These include the Belfast docks (MacKinnon) and the Gdańsk Shipyard (Szczęśniak). As Foucault said they would, those with financial and political power have turned these places into “idols,” with constraints, limits, creating monuments to the triumph of capitalism.<sup>41</sup> Thus, in these spaces, the past and the present continue to clash, leaving the unresolved wounds of the past open to infect the present. As MacKinnon and Szczęśniak demonstrate in their respective chapters, art and visual culture spotlight these wounds. In so doing, the image makes visible and sayable a past that was, until the present moment, invisible and silenced. In these and other chapters, visual culture interacts with space and location to create consciousness of the processes of present history as created by memories of the past and their representations.

39 I take this conception from Huyssen's use of Piranesi's *Carceri* in his discussion of the ruin. See Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 21–38, 23.

40 On the dark, foreboding of the abandoned urban landscapes of industry, see Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*.

41 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité*, October 1984, accessed August 22, 2022, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>.

At the same time, visual culture in the post-industrial landscape works to dis-locate sites by shifting identity away from their official designation. In this two-way relationship, the site also becomes available through appropriation for informal use and local activities, shifting its ownership once it is occupied by art and visual culture. As such, art and visual culture transform the post-industrial landscape into what Michael Rothberg calls a “multi-directional” site. The space of former or transformed industry avoids stagnation in the present and is defined by the relations between nodes of past and present meaning, always in motion on a circuit of exploration.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, we must remember that the struggle for ownership of space continues. The former dockyards in England, Ireland, Poland, all of which are central city locations examined in these pages, are in a tussle for ownership. Despite the apparent liberation of these sites through art, graffiti-like visual culture, performance and other images, the high concentration of CCTV cameras in such public spaces are a further attempt to colonize.<sup>43</sup> And so the struggle continues.

As memory theorists from Maurice Halbwachs to Foucault point out, different identities have different stakes in the past, identities often formed in the context of the sites and spaces of industry. For this reason, the place of industry is not only vital to re-igniting memories and unfixing official history, but the variegations of its appropriations are the lifeblood of ongoing debate. Moreover, the works of art and visual culture, typically *in situ*, bring heterogeneous individuals and groups of people together, in the moment, to perform, observe, and participate. In perhaps its most crucial role, visual culture creates a new audience at old sites, audiences whose differences keep the spaces and places animated. As a result, the spaces of industry are reconnected to the past, thus complicating how new audiences see the past, how “history” is written, and will be understood. In this sense, the art and visual culture are not only collaborative and participatory, they are interventionist.

## Class and Gender

The communities that enabled the industrial booms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were those that had otherwise been invisible in

42 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

43 See Les Roberts, *Film, Mobility and Urban Space* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2012), xii.

the social and ideological structures of pre-industrialized societies. As peasants and farming families were evicted by landowners and developers, they moved to cities in search of work in factories, mines, mills, and other industrial establishments. People also moved to different parts of Europe fleeing wars, religious persecution, famine, and repressive empires. Typically, if refugees did not emigrate to America in the early twentieth century, they followed the demand for labour in Europe's factories, mines, and mills. Industry was, quite simply, preferred to enslavement. Indeed, the Soviet Union and socialist Europe's command economy saw the building of a large modern industrial sector centred on immense capital-intensive factories utilizing relatively advanced production technologies, skilled labour, and abundant resources. Despite the enormous human losses, the post-revolutionary euphoria that came with this impressive building of industrial capacity allowed for meaningful increases in living standards.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in socialist countries, industrialization tended to come with levels of equality and access to education not previously enjoyed by the working classes, that is, by the people who were the human operators of industry. Lastly, industrialization became an ideological statement through which the proletariat became the powerful owner of production (Gkitsa, Szcześniak). It was also an opportunity for Soviet policies that actively encouraged women to enter the labour force. While women were not always given equal rights in the workplace, they were more populous in the socialist state labour force than in similar establishments in capitalist countries. As a result, many women who worked in industry remain ambivalent towards the often twinned projects of post-socialism and post-industrialism.

In Western Europe, working in industry gave women independence, autonomy, and a social life outside of the house. As Clarke demonstrates, for example, through interviews with women who worked at the now closed Moulinex factory in France, the factory floor was a space of gender and class solidarity and sociability.<sup>45</sup> Yet, as was the case in Eastern Europe, the cost to human life of working in Western European light and heavy industry was considerable. The deleterious conditions led to health deterioration, injury, and death. The dangers were immense, but nevertheless, as scholars who write about the sociological contours of the shift to the post-industrial across European cultures and economies argue, the fallout of diminished

44 Andrei Markevich and Steven Nafziger, "State and Market in Russian Industrialization, 1870–2010," in *The Spread of Modern Industry to the Periphery since 1871*, ed. Kevin Hjortshøj O'Rourke and Jeffrey Gale Williamson (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2017), 33–62.

45 Clarke, "Closing Time."

and, in some cases, full closure of industry has been felt overwhelmingly by women.<sup>46</sup> Contributors spotlight the importance of gendered identity within the industrial workplace (Grgić, Stewart-Halevy, Szcześniak). To give an example, beyond the factory walls, Burns demonstrates, through the photographs of Martin Nangle, how industrialization also came hand in hand with occupation of space and formations of community in the domestic sphere not previously possible in Northern Ireland. Thus, the children's playground, so often at the centre of an industrial working community, was a gendered space. Even when class and gender are not the focus of the following chapters, they are everywhere present when picturing post-industrialism.

## Chapters

To facilitate cross-cultural and interdisciplinary comparison, the anthology arranges its thirteen original chapters into five sections. Each section is organized around a particular medium of visual representation and shared themes: negotiations of contested space; the industrial space as canvas; lens-based media of photography and cinema; industrial culture in post-industrial exhibition; post-industrial design inspirations.

In Section One, "Negotiating Contested Spaces," chapters engage with art and visual culture's stake in the reappropriation of urban spaces once occupied by industrial activities, and since reclaimed by developers and investors. In the Gdańsk Shipyard, Poland, the ITAS factory in Ivanec, northern Croatia, and the docks in Belfast, Northern Ireland, local artists have created installations, murals, performances, and photographs to contest the appropriation of spaces by private investors and governments. Immediately, it is striking to note that the processes of de- and post-industrial regeneration are interwoven with the cultural and ideological complexities of the given political system. Thus, in Gdańsk, the shipyard's development has been imbricated in the government decision to distance itself from the working-class agenda of the Solidarity movement of the 1980s. In addition, like the ITAS metal factory in Croatia, the ideological

46 The literature on the role of women in the twentieth-century European industrial workplace is extensive. For particularly insightful accounts, see Jackie Clark's work. Also, Chiara Bonfiglioli, *Women and Industry in the Balkans: The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Textile Sector* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) which includes an excellent bibliography. All overviews of de-industrialization refer to the fact that the fallout is greater for women. See, for example, Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialisation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).



and cultural tensions are further complicated by the fact that it remains a functioning industrial site. Thus, workers' lives suffer a different kind of invisibility. Whereas in the waterfront districts of Belfast in Northern Ireland, workers have literally been erased in the interests of "tourist-friendly vistas" as discussed by MacKinnon. Workers at the Polish and Croatian sites have become alienated, marginalized, literally cast to the limits of cultural production. The chapters demonstrate the use of visual culture to bring workers back to the centre of the discursive and literal relationship between site and work. On the Belfast waterfront, for example, MacKinnon examines how locals have intervened in the discourse of gentrification by marking walls, footpaths, and bridges, telling their stories through graffiti-style images.

The three contributions to this section also engage with the contradictions which belie memory of the past from the perspective of the present. They bring into focus the fact that memories of difficult working and living conditions, dangerous work, and poor pay are in constant tension with the stability of having a job, a community, and an identity given by industrial work. Thus, the battle for the space and place, history and memory are set in motion in this opening section.

Following on from and closely related, Section Two turns to the use of industrial places and structures as sites to be inhabited in the present by artists, former workers, and visitors. Gkitsa discusses filmic interventions in which former workers return to their place of work in post-socialist Albania. Her analysis demonstrates that the factory was a place of possibility and opportunity for women in the economies of Eastern Europe. Thus, Gkitsa introduces the importance of gender in the industrial workplace. She also shows how the social and ideological contexts for industry, both then and now, deeply influence the contradictions of memory. My own chapter turns to the revitalized Thyssen ironworks in North Duisburg, examining *in situ* artworks designed to provoke questions of belonging in the industrial era. Namely, the coal and steel mine complex at Meiderich invites visitors back into the buildings and grounds where they encounter art and visual culture that encourage a sensuous experience of the past.

The chapters in this section address the importance of physical and affective engagement with post-industrial art and the visual culturescape. The body was central to the identity and livelihood of the worker, and in Albania and Germany alike, the body has played a vital role in art and visual culture's reintegration of the past through making visible forgotten stories. In both chapters, the authors show how artists have discovered different ways of living and belonging at the post-industrial site using their body or

those of former workers. Thus, through walking, talking, inciting affective and emotional responses to performances, the body occupies a central place in present-day remembering.

Section Three focuses on photography and cinema, arguably the most appropriate media for capturing the temporal and spatial shift from the industrial to the post-industrial. Cinema's capacity to move across time, fluidly and uninterruptedly, reinstates the ephemeral nature of industrial sites, work, and life. Photography fixes the past, but as early theorists such as Barthes have shown us, it also activates the imagination, enabling the viewer to bring the past into the present.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, as more recent photography theorists have argued, the photograph has the capacity to create community, connect people, and shape relationships.<sup>48</sup> Contributions by Grgić, Gee, and Burns engage with the multilayered times of industrial place and the lives lived therein as they are depicted in film and photography. They do so to navigate the complex tensions and contradictions across industrialization and post-industrialization in the Balkans, port cities in France, Northern England, and Ireland.

Section Four moves outside of the industrial complex and considers how best to curate and represent the past in public spaces. In their article on two exhibitions at Moscow's Museum of Contemporary Art, Arutyunyan and Egorov demonstrate the integrity of exhibiting the past such that it allows for the possibility of memories to arise in the process of looking and interacting with visual displays. Key to this experience for visitors is the use of the original materials of production in exhibition. Arutyunyan and Egorov also capture the specificity of the Russian situation—the great economic miracle and all that it did for Russia, and simultaneously, the lives lost to the experiment. Thus, the authors pose the contradiction that undergirds the post-industrial experience, from a singular perspective. Roberta Minnucci discusses an early post-industrial attempt to regenerate at the Molino Stucky in Venice. The calls to revitalize through art and architectural renovation ultimately failed because, as Minnucci says, the importance of participation by the local population was missing. If, in the contemporary moment, the most successful attempts at artistic and visual regeneration are collaborative and participatory, then the lessons of the failed Molino Stucky have been learned.<sup>49</sup>

47 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

48 Olin, *Touching Photographs*.

49 Heeney, *The Post-Industrial Landscape*.

The chapters collected in Section Five approach the picturing of the post-industrial through a wider historical and contextual lens. Contributions by Kei, Nicolas Verschueren, and Stewart-Halevy reveal the extent of the industrial imaginary, its impact on twentieth-century thought across architecture, publishing, and design. Stewart-Halevy examines the post-industrial as being marked by a continuity between pre- and post-industrial, machine and artisanal labour, residual and emergent means and relations of production. He reveals these continuities as they were conceived by the experimental work of a group of Italian designers. Kei traces the intellectual terrain of de-industrializing Britain through images of pylons published in *The Architectural Review* in the decades following the Second World War. Once again, contradictions and complexities towards the past, and in this case, the future, underwrite the identity of the post-industrial moment. In his contribution, Verschueren shows how comic books have become a forum for debate on the post-industrial condition. The graphic medium has enabled the voices of industrial-era workers to be raised, and their daringly imaginative hopes for the future.

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Coming to the end of this project, we are convinced that there is still much work to be done on the topic of art and visual culture's contributions to addressing Europe's post-industrial moment. Foremost is the relationship between the industrial activities pictured in the post-industrial moment and environmental harm. The sites discussed in *Visual Culture of Post-industrial Europe* have either been directly responsible, or are of the same genre as those that have caused the ongoing ecological crisis. While the images discussed in the following chapters do not engage the question of what is known as the Anthropocene, its concerns lurk in the background to the anthology. Indeed, there is much work to be done on the related visual culture of environmental and bodily destruction promulgated at these sites. In addition, for visual studies, a next phase of scholarship will be that of theorizing the art and images as well as the contours of their engagement with material history, geography, social formation, and economic imperatives. As editors, we hope that the following chapters lay the groundwork for the importance and urgency of the next phases of scholarship in the field.

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### About the Author

**Frances Guerin** teaches film and visual culture at the University of Kent. She is the author of *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (2005), *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany* (2012), and *The Truth Is Always Grey: A History of Modernist Painting* (2018), all with University of Minnesota Press. Her most recent book is *Jacqueline Humphries* (Lund Humphries, 2022).





# SECTION ONE

## NEGOTIATING CONTESTED SPACES



# 1. Erasure and Recovery

## Representing Labour in the De-industrializing Space of the Gdańsk Shipyard

*Magda Szcześniak*

### Abstract

The chapter outlines the double erasure of working-class lives and spaces of labour from both the history of the Gdańsk Shipyard and the future of the de-industrializing space. Through a number of revitalization and commemorative efforts, the dismantlement of the facility, the rapid deterioration of working-class lives, and the disintegration of a space once treasured as unique working-class experiences are erased from public view. The chapter also examines art projects, created primarily in the 2000s and 2010s, which work against this obliteration. Often ephemeral and some no longer existing, the artworks sought to make the effects of de-industrialization visible, calling into question both the optimism of actors involved in gentrification processes and the victorious narratives promoted by cultural institutions.

**Keywords:** Gdańsk Shipyard; Solidarity; visual arts; working-class resistance; gentrification; public art

### Gate Number 2, or, How to Enter the Shipyard?

If one were to ask an inhabitant of Gdańsk how to enter the shipyard, they would likely respond with the most obvious answer: through the gate. Officially named Gate number 2, the light blue metal structure is topped with a sign bearing the facility's name. An adjacent guard's booth painted in a deeper shade of blue stands next to it. When the shipyard was taken over by the new socialist Polish state after the Second World War, Gate number



Figure 1.1: Gate number 2 and building of the European Solidarity Center. Photo: ECS, CC BY 4.0.

2 was the most popular entrance, used by thousands of workers daily.<sup>1</sup> The shipyard's heyday spanned the period of state socialism in Poland (1944–89) when it employed up to twenty thousand workers. Industrial facilities in Poland (as elsewhere) were closed-off spaces: a high wall marked the perimeter of the facility, and entry was restricted to workers and authorized guests, at times, including workers' families. This city within a city stretched behind walls and gates with its own streets and squares, often named after shipbuilding professions. The shipyard was, of course, primarily a site of labour—with outdoor and indoor workspaces and a marina for docking vessels. However, the vast premises included many other types of spaces: sports and recreational facilities, dining halls, a health clinic, childcare facilities, a library, a ballroom, kiosks, a flower and vegetable garden, an auditorium for cinema screenings, concerts, and plays.

Gate number 2 no longer fulfils its original function. Today it functions primarily as a recognizable site of resistance, a symbol of the legendary August 1980 strike during which the “Solidarność” (Solidarity) movement was established.<sup>2</sup> Locked during the strike, the gate provided workers with a

1 For a short history of the Gdańsk Shipyard, see Andrzej Trzeciak, *Stocznia Gdańska. Miejsca, ludzie, historie* (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2019).

2 The entrance is crucial for the history of the facility also due to the events of December 1970, when—during a manifestation against price hikes—the Citizen's Militia and the military opened

sense of (relative) security and functioned as a medium of self-presentation. It was instantly adorned with flowers and religious imagery, topped with a banner reading “Proletarians of all facilities, unite!” and wooden boards bearing the strikers’ twenty-one demands.<sup>3</sup> Although we may still pass through it—maybe for the thrill of walking through a historical structure once used by the “heroes of Solidarity”—Gate number 2 is one of infinite points of entry. This is because the premises of the former Gdańsk Shipyard are no longer cordoned off from the rest of the city. Walls and buildings constituting the physical border have been steadily demolished since the late 1990s. The transformation of the once densely planned facility into a space overgrown with weeds and tall grass, dotted with remains of buildings, and severed by a new motorway exit, was gradual. As Alice Mah writes: “Industrial ruins [...] are never static objects but are in a constant state of change across time and space.” It is more appropriate to think of the transformation of industrial spaces through the category of “‘ruination’ rather than ‘ruins.’” “The word ruination captures the process as well as a form,” notes Mah.<sup>4</sup>

In Gdańsk, the process of ruination, de-industrialization and revitalization has been complex and layered. As a quick search engine inquiry shows, Gdańsk is not a typical post-industrial city. As a popular tourist destination in Central and Eastern Europe, a “pearl of bourgeois architecture,” and a seaside town with beaches and recreational nature environments, the city has, in many aspects, thrived over the past few decades.<sup>5</sup> As a whole, the city is far from descriptions offered by scholars writing about post-industrial towns and communities: it is neither a “sore sight” nor a “stark, depressing, mundane” space.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to other Polish de-industrializing cities, Gdańsk is not associated with “dirt, grayness, sadness, [...] wastelands,”

fire on the protesters, killing two people and wounding eleven. In total, forty-five people were killed during protests in Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Szczecin between December 14 and December 19. The demand to raise a monument to the “fallen shipyard workers” functioned as a rallying cry for shipyard workers in the 1970s. Magda Szcześniak, “Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers,” in *Monument: Central and Eastern Europe 1918–2018*, ed. Agnieszka Tarasiuk (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe, 2018), 54–58.

3 For the list of demands see, Jadwiga Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

4 Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 1.

5 See City of Gdańsk website, *Get to Know the Sites of Gdańsk*, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.gdansk.pl/en/for-tourists>.

6 Anca Pusca, “Industrial and Human Ruins of Postcommunist Europe,” *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2010): 239–55, 239; Mah, *Industrial Ruination*, 147.

to quote Piotr Kisiel's description of the former textile empire of Łódź.<sup>7</sup> As Anca Pusca rightly points out, Gdańsk is a city, which despite its de-industrialization can "capitalize on its former glory" and "survive on its beauty alone."<sup>8</sup> Although the shipyard is situated in the city centre, a mere one and a half kilometres from the fifteenth-century Gothic and Renaissance Town Hall and the iconic Neptune's Fountain, for years, due to the preservation of the walls, the disintegration remained out of sight for most. The process of spatial ruination did not spill over to the rest of the city, but rather, remained locked within the perimeters of the facility. The unclear status of the grounds—partially de-industrialized and sold off to private investors and partially a space of ongoing labour—made the status of the shipyard even less legible to the inhabitants of Gdańsk. This does not mean that—to quote Mah—the shipyard's "forms and processes of industrial ruination" were not "experienced by people." Rather, they were experienced differently by different populations.<sup>9</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the first population exposed to the processes of ruination were the employees of the state-owned facility and their families. As the facility struggled with free market challenges, the spaces and social institutions central to the workers' lives started to crumble. After 1989, major layoffs were carried out, resulting in a decrease of employees from almost twenty thousand to a couple of hundred. The fate of the company was tumultuous: following privatization of the shipyard in 1990 (with the state remaining the primary shareholder), it was declared insolvent in 1996. In Poland, the reduction and closure of industrial facilities after 1989 were met with strong resistance from the working classes.<sup>10</sup> One of the last strikes before the declaration of insolvency, in June 1996, was joined by four thousand labourers, some of whom had participated in the 1980 strike.<sup>11</sup> After 1996, the company and the shipyard real estate were divided, and subsequently bought and re-sold by private investors. In an unexpected turn of events, in 2018, the state reacquired part of

7 Piotr Kisiel, "When We Say Postindustrial—We Mean Ruins," *Heritage and Society* 14, no. 1 (2021): 20–45, 28.

8 Pusca, "Industrial and Human Ruins," 243. I agree with Pusca's categorization of Gdańsk as a city which capitalizes on its past—both as a historic town and as the birthplace of Solidarity—I am interested in the effects of this capitalization.

9 Mah, *Industrial Ruination*, 9.

10 For data on strikes in the 1990s in Poland and in relation to other European countries, see Paulina Sekuła, "Aktywność protestacyjna Polaków w latach 1989–2009," *Polityka i Społeczeństwo* 3, no. 11 (2003): 85–99.

11 Anonymus, "O Stoczni raz jeszcze," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 13, 1996, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/217389/O-Stoczni-raz-jeszcze>.

the original company. The shipyard is thus still a site of labour, although building is now carried out in areas located furthest from the urban fabric, mostly on the Ostrów Island. Previous entrances have been replaced by a bridge connecting the mainland with the island. Every day from Monday to Friday, industrial labourers cross the bridge to build ships and wind towers.

Even though the shipyard was one of the largest industrial facilities in socialist Poland and a site of working-class resistance and that industrial activities continue at the site, work in both its past and present manifestations is eerily invisible. This paradox manifests itself clearly in the contemporary status of Gate number 2—a once functional structure, the solitary survivor of the socialist-era barrier separating the shipyard from the rest of the city. Although its historical function related to daily working-class labour, today its signification is limited to a being a reminder of the history of the “Solidarity” movement. As if frozen in time, it has consistently been stylized by the local government to resemble its appearance in the days of August 1980. Portraits of the Black Madonna and John Paul II, red and white flowers, and Polish national flags decorate the gate. A religious image and replica of the wooden boards bearing the twenty-one demands of the Interfactory Striking Committee hang above the guard’s booth. This turns the gate into a monument of the August 1980 strikes.

In what follows, I examine the erasure and silencing of the history of labour through various revitalization and commemorative efforts. I will then turn to art projects, created primarily in the 2000s and 2010s, when the effects of de-industrialization became visible to the wider public. Often ephemeral, these artworks sought to make the effects of de-industrialization visible, calling into question both the optimism of social actors involved in gentrification processes and the victorious narratives promoted by cultural institutions.

## Roads to Capitalism

Since the Second World War, the shipyard has played an important role in the cultural memory of the city. However, the social dynamics and ideology of the post-socialist transition, which promoted privatization and a shift into a de-industrialized economy, strongly influenced a specific politics of memorializing the shipyard’s history. In what follows, I outline the double erasure of working-class lives and spaces of labour from both past and future. The first erasure is carried out by public institutions, the second by commercial

developers leading the project of “revitalization.” Memorial activities were carried out by the local government, cultural institutions, and the Solidarity trade union. Rather than focusing on day-to-day rhythms of the industrial facility and the lives of its workers, only the unique and dramatic moments of discontinuing labour were considered worth remembering. Furthermore, the strikes of 1970 and 1980 were interpreted as crucial elements of the “road to freedom,” that is, proof of the working-class desire to dismantle the socialist state and facilitate a transition to capitalism. Although this interpretation of working-class resistance during state socialism is not supported by sociological accounts from the era and has been challenged by many contemporary historians, the anti-communist interpretation of the Solidarity movement became the foundational myth of the new state after 1989.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this narrative must grapple with the consequences of the post-socialist transition, or rather, its trajectory, known among locals as “shock therapy.” Namely, the privatization of major industrial facilities and their subsequent collapse.<sup>13</sup> If the workers are recognized as a major force in the anti-communist and pro-market struggle, they would also have to be seen as architects of their own demise. To avoid concentrating on the tragic post-1989 fate of the facility, the government’s telling of its past is limited to the “glorious past” of the 1980 strikes, interpreted as the first step on the “road to freedom.” The future of the already de-industrialized spaces is framed as bright and full of opportunities.

The politics of erasing memories of labour are visible in the conflict between, on the one hand, the use of industrial spaces, and on the other, architectural structures and artefacts associated with the 1980 strike. The objects related to industrial labour and working-class lives have either been successively razed or gutted and refashioned as high-end commercial and residential buildings. However, the local government has preserved structures and artefacts associated with the 1980 strike,

12 For sociological accounts of the movement on the ground, see Staniszkis, *Poland’s Self-Limiting Revolution*; Alain Tourraine, Francois Dubet, Michel Wieviorka, and Jan Strzelecki, *Solidarity: The Analysis of a Social Movement: Poland 1980–1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a progressive account of the movement written after the introduction of martial law in December 1981, see Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland’s Working-Class Democratization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). For contemporary interventions into the liberal and conservative interpretations of Solidarity, see Jan Sowa, “An Unexpected Twist of Ideology: Neoliberalism and the Collapse of the Soviet Bloc,” *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, no. 5 (2012), accessed June 1, 2022, [http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/PT\\_nr5\\_2012\\_Logika\\_sensu/13.Sowa.pdf](http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/PT_nr5_2012_Logika_sensu/13.Sowa.pdf).

13 On the application of neoliberal “shock therapy” in the context of post-socialist Poland, see Jane Hardy, *Poland’s New Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).



adding them to heritage lists, and making them available for public use. Apart from Gate number 2, an important example of this commemorative politics is the Sala BHP (Occupational Health and Safety Hall). The trade union responsible for the building has preserved the memory of negotiations between the Interfactory Striking Committee and the government delegation that took place in the building. Although the permanent exhibition features several artefacts related to the facility's industrial production—such as models created in the mid-1970s for the Gdańsk Shipyard Memory Chamber in the same building—its primary focus is the 1980 strike.

Perhaps the most striking instance of the chosen politics of commemoration is the main exhibition of the European Solidarity Centre (ECS) built on the site of razed industrial buildings. The exhibition opened more than a decade after the facility declared insolvency and is located on the de-industrializing site of the shipyard. It makes no mention of the fates of the employees after the end of socialism. The focus on the history of Solidarity is central to the mission of the institution, described as “honoring our greatest civic success, [...] commemorating the revolution of Solidarity and the fall of communism in Europe.”<sup>14</sup> Although the building resembles a rusted ship's hull both inside and outside, the Centre's vast permanent exhibition is disinterested in the history of the shipyard as an industrial facility and workplace. The shipyard is a backdrop to a display of artefacts salvaged from the site. The objects include a punch card system for entry; workers' lockers; an electric trolley; and the booth of an overhead crane in which prominent figure of the Solidarity movement Anna Walentynowicz worked. A collection of yellow helmets hangs from the rusted ceiling. The exhibition tells little about the facility itself. For example, the nature of work, the population of blue- and white-collar employees, the social infrastructure of the shipyard and its relation to the city of Gdańsk are not addressed. As historians point out, the nature of the facility contributed to the workers' readiness to strike both in 1970 and 1980.<sup>15</sup> Not because the shipyard was a poorly functioning workplace offering menial jobs, but the opposite. The relative stability of work, higher wages, a communal atmosphere, and opportunities for socializing contributed to frequent formulations of demands on the part of workers. These led

14 Mission statement on the website of European Solidarity Centre, accessed June 1, 2022, [https://ecs.gda.pl/title>About\\_ECS,pid,21.html](https://ecs.gda.pl/title>About_ECS,pid,21.html).

15 See, for example, Anna Machciewicz, *Bunt. Strajki w Trójmieście. Sierpień 1980* (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2015).

to fervent discussion with management and less frequent strikes. The “moral economy” of shipyard workers—to use the term coined by labour historian E. P. Thompson—was connected to the socialist workplace, both its opportunities and its limitations.<sup>16</sup> The failure to account for the social history of the facility thus results in the exhibition’s simplified and generalized narrative. It tells a story with no patience for in-depth analysis and nuance.<sup>17</sup> The exhibition concludes with a description of the first partially free elections held on June 4, 1989.

To be sure, the struggle “for freedom” from the socialist state dominates the narrative about the past offered by Gdańsk’s public institutions. By contrast, the shaping of the story about the future of the de-industrialized shipyard has been left to private property developers.<sup>18</sup> The one hundred and fifty-hectare area, comprising most of the former Gdańsk Shipyard, has been renamed as “Młode Miasto” (Young City) and will gradually be “revitalized” by private investors.<sup>19</sup> Due to a complicated ownership structure, a few former industrial buildings have been made available to the public. Nevertheless, a brief look at the architectural plans and already renovated sites reveal that industrial elements are used as a tactic to make spaces more attractive for investors. Property developer websites promote the “legacy” and “history” of the premises, emphasizing the “great historical importance” of space thanks to its establishment in the nineteenth century and centrality to *Solidarność*. In the renovated buildings, elements of the past are appropriated from original labour environments and reused in white-collar work settings. While purely decorative, such details provide architects and designers with an alibi, seemingly proving their interest in the industrial past of the re-functioned spaces.

Partially exposed red-brick, industrial lighting and piping, occupational safety posters, and archival photographs of the shipyard feature prominently in advertising materials of *Stocznia Cesarska Development*, a sub-company of a Belgian developer operating on the premises of the oldest part of the

16 E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971): 76–136.

17 See also: Magda Szczesniak, “Voracious Images, Forgotten Images: Notes on the Visual Culture of the Polish Solidarity Movement,” *Oxford Art Journal* 45, no. 2 (2022): 207–31.

18 Most of the premises were sold to private investors in the 1990s by the privatized *Stocznia Gdańska SA*. This included the oldest parts of the facility—buildings erected in the late nineteenth century by the German Empire, which Gdańsk was a part of until 1920, when it became a Free City. Some of these were written into the National Registry of Historic Buildings in 2017.

19 The name is reference to the historical “Jungstadt” established in these territories by the Teutonic Order in the late fourteenth century.

shipyard.<sup>20</sup> The renderings prepared by real estate developer Euro Styl feature the same elements as a revitalization of a 1930s former engine assembly plant. The new *Montownia* (*Assembly Building*) will house a food hall, conference facilities, and “shipyard inspired” lofts for short-term rental, all incorporating the red-brick, glass, and steel elements of industrial architecture. In its advertising materials, Euro Styl uses the well-known rhetoric of gentrification in which developers are portrayed as benevolent and restorative forces:

The lands of the former Gdańsk Shipyard are awakening from slumber. Post-industrial buildings and silhouettes of shipyard cranes will become a backdrop for a new living space. [...] The company aims at giving a breath of modernity into the nooks of the shipyard, not forgetting about the history rooted into these grounds.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, “the breath of modernity” will be available to those who can afford it. These include, targeted groups comprising members of the “creative class” (“freelancers, start-ups and small businesses”), tourists (“most demanding hotel guests”), and, of course, investors.<sup>22</sup>

The hijacking of industrial spaces for contemporary commercial means is best visible in a promotional video created by Euro Styl and Torus, another developer. In it, hip, young, and racially diverse artists, dancers, and well-known local photographer Michał Szlaga, are filmed against a backdrop of the iconic shipyard landscape with cranes.<sup>23</sup> Performers animate the impressive spaces to the sound of an inspirational indie-rock song. Thus, the interiors and rooftops of assembly halls, the bridge to Ostrów Island, the docking grounds are brought to life with various dance styles of ballet, tap-dance, hip-hop. In the beginning of the film, a young woman walks into a derelict space and drops her bag and coat on the floor. By the end, a group of fashionably dressed young people energetically marches onto the docks as the image focuses on the photographer, who, in turn, points his camera in the direction of the viewer. A slogan appears: “Finally Young City.” Youth, creativity, mobility, diversity, and hipness are framed as the already approaching future of post-industrial spaces.

20 See website, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://stoczniacesarska.pl>.

21 See website, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.eurostyl.com.pl/pl-pl/trojmiasto/montownia>.

22 See website, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://stoczniacesarska.pl/en/mind-dock-co-working>.

23 See “DOKI. Gdańsk. Młode Miasto. (EURO STYL & TORUS). Laureat nagrody EPA 2021–2022,” accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6dBhMy5ksgm>.

### “The Workers Were Standing on the Other Side”<sup>24</sup>

The use of art as means of gentrification is not new. As Daniel Ley wrote, “the urban artist is commonly the expeditionary force for the inner-city gentrifiers [...] transforming ugliness into a source of admiration.”<sup>25</sup> Szlaga and the dancers offer credibility to the space in Euro Styl and Torus’s promotional video. Without their presence, the site could be perceived as drab and dilapidated. Thus, art and hipness are employed to convince members of the new middle classes to invest their capital and time in this de-industrializing space. However, the appropriation of the arts was not the only mode in which art existed on the premises of the shipyard. Artists were the first to come into contact with the de-industrializing space of the shipyard in the 2000s. De-industrialization opened up the possibility of obtaining attractive studios, exhibition, and living spaces. Predictably, their experience of the space diverged from how it was perceived by its long-time users. However, artists also demonstrated a high degree of interest in the shipyard as an historical space of labour and, consequently, produced reflections that transcended the institutional and investor frameworks of memory and visions for the future. This certainly differentiates artists from other institutions, such as real estate developers, the local government, and heritage museums.

The first artistic practices in the shipyard were sanctioned by the Polish Roads to Freedom Solidarity Museum, the forebearer of the ECS. In 2000, for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of August 1980, the exhibition *Roads to Freedom* was opened in the Health and Occupational Safety Hall. The organizers also commissioned Grzegorz Klaman, a well-known local artist and artworld organizer, to create a public sculpture for the occasion. Klaman’s two imposing structures, titled *Gate 1* and *Gate 2*, were placed directly behind the historical gate, on the path leading to the Health and Occupational Safety Hall. Although titled as if they were versions of the same object, Klaman’s *Gates* do not in fact resemble each other. *Gate 1*, a rusted, slanted pyramid structure, is shaped like a ship’s hull, protruding from the ground. *Gate 2* is a not-entirely-faithful materialization of Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1919). Both structures invite the viewer to pass

24 Magda Grabowska, “Każda sztuka jest polityczna: Rozmowa z Grzegorzem Klamaniem,” *Sztukapubliczna.pl*, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://sztukapubliczna.pl/pl/kazda-sztuka-jest-polityczna-grzegorz-klaman/czytaj/108>.

25 Daniel Ley, *The New Middle Classes and the Remaking of the Central City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 301.

through, but only *Gate 1* offers an immersive experience. On the inside of the sculpture, multiple display screens hang tilted, unsigned quotes from famous and infamous world leaders such as Josef Stalin and John Paul II rapidly change in front of the visitor's eyes. The awkward positioning of the screen and the slanted walls create a dizzying experience. Klamán's sculptures, described by the artist as anti-monuments, read as a comment on global political processes and conflicts. With *Gate 1*, the dizzying power of political ideology is revealed to have destructive consequences on the shipyard, symbolized here as a sinking ship. In *Gate 2*, Klamán reutilized a symbol of communist ideology to mark the failure of the most successful anti-capitalist political project. In contradistinction to Tatlin's model, in which two spirals wind upwards to create a sensation of fluid movement, Klamán introduced sharp angles to thwart the flow represented by Tatlin's design. The artist replaced Tatlin's use of glass and steel with rusty red and white pylons and a sombre black slab. Utopia is no more and, judging by the placement of the sculptures, its demise has been triggered by the resistance movement born in the Gdańsk Shipyard.

Although more dark than celebratory, devoid of recognizable anti-communist symbols such as the national flag or religious icons, Klamán's *Gates* did not transcend the official narrative outlined above. However, the reception and institutional treatment of the *Gates* became a teachable moment for local artists. Judged as obscure and perplexing by many local policymakers, the *Gates* quickly fell into disrepair, as if imitating the state of their surroundings. Gdańsk's Culture Department received the rights to administer the structures upon their unveiling but neglected them for lack of funds. The local government unsuccessfully tried to pawn the *Gates* to the ECS, which in turn, declined the opportunity.<sup>26</sup> Vandalized, malfunctioning, and unmarked, the sculptures became a symbol of the disregard for public art in the post-socialist context. In the most recent turn of events, Euro Styl moved the sculptures to a different location on the premises of the shipyard without informing the artist.<sup>27</sup>

Even before the neglect of the *Gates* had become visible, a specific episode during the opening of the *Roads to Freedom* exhibition forced many artists to rethink their engagement with the shipyard space. The exhibition took

26 For a summary, see Maciej Śmiałowski, "Bramy Grzegorza Klamana, czyli gdańska tragedia antyczna," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, no. 23 (2020): 233–39.

27 Maciej Sandecki, "Słynne Bramy Grzegorza Klamana przeniesione w inne miejsce. Artysta: czuję się jak śmieć," *Wyborcza.pl Trójmiasto*, May 23, 2022, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://trojmiasto.wyborcza.pl/trojmiasto/7,35612,28489838,slynnne-bramy-grzegorza-klamana-zostaly-przeniesione-w-inne.html>.



Figure 1.2: View of Grzegorz Klamán's *Gates* after their removal from original site by the developer. Photo: Magda Szcześniak.

place in the Health and Occupational Safety Hall and was widely attended by local politicians, *Solidarność* activists, artists, and members of cultural circles. A fence was erected for the occasion to cordon off guests from the rest of the shipyard space. Shipyard workers were thus excluded from the celebrations. As Klamán himself recounts:

The ceremony was controversial. The VIPs were celebrating inside, and the workers were standing on the other side of the fence and observing us. When I saw this, it was just shocking—I understood that those in power are, again, appropriating the situation, making a great spectacle just for themselves.<sup>28</sup>

The episode is exemplary for the post-socialist moment and its politics of marginalizing the working classes. More specifically, it functions as a stark symbol of the usurpation of spaces in the process of de-industrialization by

<sup>28</sup> Grabowska, "Każda sztuka jest polityczna." The episode appears also in memories of other participants of the opening, see Jacek Niegoda, "Collaboration = współpraca czy kolaboracja?," in *Wyparte dyskursy: Sztuka wobec zmian społecznych i deindustrializacji lat 90*, ed. Mikołaj Iwański (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii w Szczecinie, 2016), 44–59.

the dominant classes, literally pushing those who still perform industrial labour out of their field of vision.

## Counter-Histories

The episode became a turning point for Klamán, pushing him towards projects that placed industrial workers in the centre. *Subiektywna Linia Autobusowa* (*Subjective Bus Line*), was a participatory art project initiated in 2002, in which former shipyard employees were invited to act as tour guides in their former workplaces.<sup>29</sup> The bus tours were open to the public and became both a way of discovering shipyard sites for those who had never been inside, and simultaneously, a space of sharing memories and creating a counter-historical narrative. Described by the artist as a “social sculpture,” the *Subjective Bus Line* offered participants an opportunity to become part of a counter-public. Michael Warner defines a counter-public thus: a “public defined by their tension with a larger public,” a group “maintaining at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.”<sup>30</sup> In *Subjective Bus Line*, representatives of the industrial working class whose voices were deemed unimportant and bodies excluded became historians of their own labour.<sup>31</sup> The idea of creating a space for workers’ stories was further explored by Klamán in his installation *Solidność* (*Reliability*). *Solidność*, a play on the word *solidarność*, consisted of a video with interviews with three former shipyard workers placed in shipyard buildings. The interlocutors included a member of the illegal militant faction of the *Solidarność* trade union which remained active after 1989. He also interviewed the 1970s former director of the Gdańsk Shipyard, and a former trade union activist who strongly opposed artistic interventions in the shipyard, and thus, came into conflict with Klamán. The participants thus represented groups of workers whose experiences of resistance and ideas about the present state of the shipyard were rarely present in the post-socialist public sphere. Neither were they included in official memorializations of the Solidarity movement. The interviews were played on a loop on tiny television screens placed on locker

29 According to Klamán, thirty to forty thousand people participated over ten years, most producing their own visual records. See Grabowska, “Każda sztuka jest polityczna.”

30 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 56.

31 Klamán recreated the *Subjective Bus Line* project for the ninth edition of the Manifesta festival, which took place in the Belgian city of Genk in 2012. The bus toured the former Limburg mines. See “Grzegorz Klamán’s A Subjective Bus Line,” *e.flux.com*, May 12, 2012, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34182/grzegorz-klaman-s-a-subjective-bus-line/>.

doors and other workplace furniture. The primary way of experiencing the work after its brief presentation *in situ* was through photographic documentation. In the photographs, Klamán concentrated more on the industrial facilities than the on-screen image. Television screens could be seen in the back and side of the image, thus emphasizing the vastness, emptiness, and ruination of once lively halls. Although the artistic intervention animated the spaces—former workers return (even though only on screens) to the facility—it did so temporarily and without the presumption of providing a solution, or even much hope.

A different approach to collecting the thoughts and recollections of shipyard workers underlies the mural *Stocznia (Shipyards)* (2004) by local artist Iwona Zajac. At the time of the mural's conception, Zajac had a studio in the so-called *Kolonia Artystów (Artist's Colony)*. The space was located in the former Telephone Exchange building of the Gdańsk Shipyards lent to artists by a private developer in 2001. Inspired by both her daily walks through shipyard spaces and Anna Olivier's *Dockstories* (2003) project, Zajac began to look for current shipyard employees whose stories could be presented to the public in the form of a mural. Despite her daily presence on the premises, the task was not easy. According to the artist, the shipyard workers were wary of outsiders and tired of being asked questions. Through the help of friends whose family members worked in the shipyard, the artist managed to convince eleven workers to participate by answering questions about their personal attitude towards their workplace:

I asked them what's it like to spend one's whole life working in the same place, about how they felt about the fact that the shipyard is shrinking, how some spaces are closed, what's it like to look at buildings deteriorating, buildings that used to teem with life. What they think of us, artists, who appeared in the shipyard. How they imagine the future of the shipyard. I didn't want to ask them about politics, but about life, feelings, and dreams.<sup>32</sup>

The answers were transcribed by the artist and copied onto the outer shipyard wall. The quotes were painted in black against a light blue background. Stencilled shipyard machines and landscapes adorned the wall, functioning as a decorative detail to complement the centrally placed quotes. Although

32 Magda Grabowska, "Cud ciężkiej pracy: Rozmowa z Iwoną Zajac," *Sztukapubliczna.pl*, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://sztukapubliczna.pl/pl/cud-ciezkiej-pracy-iwona-zajac/czytaj/22>.



created in the same year as Klamann's *Solidność*, one can sense important shifts in Zając's project: from politics to feelings and from the past to the present. The past appears as an important element of the worker's stories. However, it is not portrayed as a closed-off temporality about which to reminisce and argue, but rather, is contextualized as having an immense influence on present life experiences. The large industrial facility provided shipyard workers with a sense of meaning and belonging, a daily rhythm, and a network of close relationships. De-industrialization is thus described as loss of bearing and disorientation. On one of the walls, a worker is quoted: "When they closed parts of the facility I didn't feel well, where should I go without work, what should I do? Steal or what? It wasn't pleasant."<sup>33</sup> On another, "When they fired us in 1997 and we didn't know what would happen to the shipyard, we had trouble thinking. [...] I can't imagine anything else being built here." Other quotes question the point of voicing one's opinion: "It's just aggravating, one worked so much and could see how the facility prospered, and they turned it into a desert. It's not worth saying anything, it won't change anything." And yet, the twenty-two parts of the muralled wall appear to seek change, if only in the public perception of how de-industrialization processes influence the local working class, particularly their experiences of post-socialist change.

As it turned out, the mural both offered testimonies of de-industrialization and became its victim. In 2008, the artist was informed that the wall on which the mural was painted would be destroyed by a developer. Initially supported by the city and media, the artist fought for the right to save the piece through moving it to another place. Later, Zając gave up on the idea:

The wall spoke about the ethos of work, people spoke about simple things, [...] and now it was supposed to become some kind of strange relic, warehoused somewhere, no one knows where they would place it in the end, if it would even be the shipyard. [...] In the end I apologized to everyone for making a fuss and said that I had decided that I want the mural to pass away, just like the history of the shipyard is slowly meeting its end here.<sup>34</sup>

After receiving notice of demolition set for 2013, the artist decided to paint the wall black, a gesture both simple and labour intensive. Blackness evoked

33 See the project's website for interviews and documentation of the mural, accessed June 1, 2022, [https://www.stoczniaweterze.com/?page\\_id=98](https://www.stoczniaweterze.com/?page_id=98).

34 Grabowska, "Cud ciężkiej pracy."



Figure 1.3: Iwona Zając painting over her mural. Photo: Magda Małyjasiak.

mourning, but, as the artist emphasized, the main reason for painting the mural was that she “saw other shipyard buildings undergo demolition and how their fragments were strewn on the ground, and turned into rubble, into trash” and she “didn’t want the same thing to happen to the very personal words of the shipyard workers.”<sup>35</sup> The artist’s final intervention thus grew out of her first-hand experience of de-industrialization. The inevitable cruelty of the process was symbolically curbed by exercising artistic agency. The wall was demolished in January 2013, and sometime later, Zając moved her archive of stories online.<sup>36</sup>

## Landscapes of Ruination

Zając was not the only artist struck by the intensity of the ruination process in the Gdańsk Shipyard. In 1999, Michał Szlaga began documenting the changing environment and presenting the photographs in various contexts: an online blog, physical exhibitions, self-printed postcards, and finally, a

35 Grabowska, “Cud ciężkiej pracy.”

36 See also two videos made as a result of the decision to demolish the wall: *The Shipyard Nike Is Leaving*, dir. Iwona Zając, <https://vimeo.com/68158510>, accessed June 1, 2022; *Farewell*, dir. Iwona Zając, <https://vimeo.com/user17711098>, accessed June 1, 2022.

photobook published in 2013.<sup>37</sup> Among the first cohort of artists working in the Artist's Colony, Szlaga became a first-hand witness of the demolition of many historic buildings: from former mid-twentieth-century worker's housing, through the 1900 Director's Villa, to both pre- and post-war large industrial halls. The most spectacular photographs in Szlaga's archive capture acts of demolition as they were occurring: a huge crane caught mid-air as it crashed to the ground, machines punching through walls, clouds of dust rising from the ground as buildings crumbled.<sup>38</sup> Demolitions are also documented through a simple, yet chilling, "before-and-after" juxtaposition of images in the photobook and exhibitions. On the left, we see a typical industrial landscape. On the right, what is left after demolition of some or all structures. The two photographs are taken from an identical vantage point and, while it would be tempting to say that the photograph on the right portrays a vacuum, it is also true that in place of the old structures, new elements come into view. Sometimes buildings directly adjacent to the demolished structure are visible, at others, more distant elements of the landscape come into view. Our eyes go back and forth between the "before" and "after," struggling to establish whether the two images actually portray the same space. The photographs are tinged with nostalgia, forcing us to focus on the sudden absence of an impressive architectural structure. Yet, demolition here is also revealed as a process of creation of new views and landscapes.

Other images from Szlaga's vast archive can be roughly divided into two groups: the first photographs documenting the ruination of the shipyard, the second focusing on the spaces and rituals, and workers engaged in ongoing industrial labour. Despite the thematic differences, the two make use of a similar aesthetics: objects and subjects are captured frontally, the front plane often rendered in sharp focus. In both images, the world and its ruination continue beyond the frame. The lighting is stark, the skies overcast, and the interiors dimly lit. A flatness characterizes the images, visible especially in photographs of surfaces captured up close. A green and brown steel surface with large piece of paint flaking off, a handwritten sign "Niech żyje Lech Wałęsa" (Long Live Lech Wałęsa) on a cracked white wall, a Solidarity banner tightly tied to a gate, metal rods visible underneath the

37 Michał Szlaga, *Stocznia* (Gdańsk: Fundacja Karrenwall, 2013). Szlaga kept a blog from 2009 to 2016. For posts devoted to his activities at the shipyard, accessed June 1, 2022, <http://szlaga.blogspot.com/search/label/stocznia>.

38 The spectacular character of the demolition process is further emphasized through montage in a short film Szlaga produced for the "Alternativa" festival organized by the Wyspa Art Institute in 2012. See Michał Szlaga, *2010–2012*, 2012, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/88853410>.

fabric. In photographs of the shipyard workers, often portrayed with their work tools, the foreground collapses into the background, as if to signal the inseparability of the workers' identity and their surroundings. This stylized flatness draws attention to the multiple details making up the institution of labour: the diversity of spaces and artefacts, machines and furniture, official and unofficial decorations.

The relationship between the photographs of ruination and those of labour is crucial to interpretation of the *Shipyards* series. Szlaga's archive renders industrial ruins nostalgic, inevitably making room for new spatial and social forms. But it is also proof of the resilience of the industry, continuing to occupy a site that has been rendered historical by others. The vastness of the archive allows different stories to be told. And yet, in both the *Shipyards* photobook, and its public reception, critics have focused on images of ruin. In her essay on the legacy of the Solidarity movement, Ewa Majewska points to the dangerous appeal of the series. She claims it verges onto promoting a "sentimental spectatorship," a gazing with awe at the glory of industrial ruination. She writes: "This petrification in front of the Shipyard ruins is a beautiful tribute to the past of the Gdańsk Shipyard, but it will not have any political effect unless its author reformulates his artistic strategy, and instead of aestheticizing the demolition, will think about more collective strategies."<sup>39</sup> Although the artist's personal trajectory need not affect our reading of images, Szlaga's decision to participate in the Euro Styl advertisement closes off the possibility of "overcoming nostalgia and reaching for a new solidarity to come."<sup>40</sup> In the video, as well as in Szlaga's statement on Euro Styl's website, photography becomes a tool for registering the beauty and specificity of post-industrial spaces. Szlaga writes, "I believe that the oldest shipyard facilities will naturally become the pearls of the new district. What originally attracted me to them was their beauty that would reveal itself all year long, in different seasons and auras."<sup>41</sup> Here, industrial ruins are inscribed into the natural order and experienced as beautiful, ready to reveal themselves to the new inhabitants of the neighbourhood as aesthetic objects in a Kantian sense. They are devoid of functionality and awe-inspiring.

39 Ewa Majewska, "Between Nostalgia and (Political) Solidarity: Some Notes on the Gdańsk Shipyard," *View: Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, no. 4 (2013), accessed June 1, 2012, <https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2013/4-ruin/between-nostalgia-and-political-solidarity-some-notes-on-the-gdansk>.

40 Majewska, "Between Nostalgia and (Political) Solidarity."

41 See the "Project Shipyard" tab on the website for the DOKI investment, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://doki.pl/en/project-shipyard/>.

As Alexander Rieger has skilfully demonstrated, a purely aesthetic experience of deterioration that turns an image of calamity into one of ruin is only possible with a degree of distance. Rieger notes:

For Kant this distance is not simply spatial; it is also mental, achieved through rationalization of the terror in front of us. If we can conceptually grasp what is terrifying us, we may be able to generate the distance necessary for pleasure to take place.<sup>42</sup>

In the context of post-socialist ruins, the replacement of a political reading of the ruination of working-class environments with a purely aesthetic contemplation of industrial ruins also results from distancing. This operation of distancing oneself from the “terror” of what occurred in the Gdańsk Shipyard during the post-socialist transition must involve the erasure of contemporary labour from the field of vision. It is thus a gesture to be interpreted in class terms. Only the members of the new middle and upper classes have access to this aestheticized point of view. Because only they will be able to afford an apartment with a spectacular “view with cranes,” or at least, a table at a post-industrial themed restaurant. In addition, only they possess the class “distance necessary for pleasure to take place.”<sup>43</sup>

### Resisting Distance

An insistence on experiencing post-socialist de-industrialization in a political framework would necessarily result in the will to work against this distance between shipyard workers and middle-class viewers (and artists), between spaces of ongoing labour and the increasingly sanitized space of post-industrial real estate development, between memories of the socialist institution of labour and post-socialist de-industrialization. In concluding examples, Kłaman’s *Solidarity Guerilla* (2014–16) and Anna Królikiewicz’s *Simple Traces/Notebook* (2015), insist on this distance in different ways. Both works are part of the NOMUS New Art Museum collection and were included in the first exhibition of the new institution established on the premises of the shipyard. The NOMUS New Art Museum opened in 2021 in a

42 Alexander Rieger, “Foundational Ruins: The Lisbon Earthquake and the Sublime,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 357–74, 366.

43 Rieger, “Foundational Ruins,” 366.

pre-war building which, in the socialist period, housed the Gdańsk Shipyard vocational school and a shipyard dining hall.<sup>44</sup>

*Solidarity Guerilla* is a series of panoramic photographs of the de-industrializing spaces of Silesian coal mines and the Gdańsk Shipyard. The images remind us of Szlaga's landscapes. However, Klaman's project resists the aestheticizing gaze. The ruins of *Solidarity Guerrilla* are not as visually attractive: they are often situated in a hazy background, drawing our attention to a vehicle placed right in the centre of the frame, an object that occludes the perspectival vanishing point. We recognize the small yellow vehicle as typical for industrial settings, with its door-less booth and a spacious open back for transport. A machine gun on a tall stand sits on the back of the truck. It is not an object commonly seen in industrial settings. Three men stand on and around the truck, also bearing guns. As the series' title suggests, the project imagines a working-class movement which has taken up arms, presumably to defend the vast swaths of land, natural resources, and industrial machinery. The subsequent photographs show the vehicle parked in different places, as if patrolling the facilities. *Solidarity Guerilla* is unique amongst artworks created in the Gdańsk Shipyard in its attempt to speculate about the future of this and other de-industrializing spaces. The series asks questions such as: What would it take for the working class to execute control over this space? What would need to occur for industrial carts to be turned into mobile para-military equipment? And what kind of solidarities would this guerrilla forge? The photographs, thus and the vehicle, are presented in exhibition settings to force the viewer to recognize de-industrializing areas as sites of class conflict in the present and future. By engaging visual markers of potential violence and asking how "Solidarity" became the "Solidarity guerrilla," Klaman draws attention to acts of violence which have already been carried out in these spaces by those in charge.

In *Simple Traces*, Królikiewicz visualizes labour differently, attending to the physicality of work. The large piece of 5.8 by 8-metre muslin fabric was created with the use of the traditional Japanese dyeing technique. As curator Aneta Szyłak explains, *shibori* "involves tying small knots and stitching and folding several times before dyeing the material. Dipped in

44 The institution was established formally in 2015 and is a descendant of the Wyspa Institute which operated on the same premises between 2004 and 2016, producing some of the first artistic activities in the shipyard. See Aneta Szyłak, "A Collection in Action: Openness, Proximity, Process, and Performance," in *Nomus. Kolekcja w działaniu. Collection in Action*, ed. Aneta Szyłak and Aleksandra Grzonkowska, trans. J. Figiel (Gdańsk: Muzeum Narodowe w Gdańsku, 2021): 23–31.

pigment, dried, and then, untangled, the smooth fabric is transformed into patterned fabric.<sup>45</sup> If not for its scale, the fabric could be confused with pieces of cloth present in industrial environments, for example, rags used to wipe down machines or clean dust from one's face. However, the work's closeness to industrial labour exceeds visual resemblance. The fabric owes its pigment to rust lifted from tools and metal moulds collected by the artist in the shipyard. The objects, formerly used in heavy industrial labour, were wrapped in muslin and used to create an abstract artwork. The physical and material elements of these objects, such as dirt and rust, were a product of their specific temporal and spatial conditions. The materiality of the industrial facility is listed in the description of the artwork as "rust from the Gdańsk Shipyard" and imprinted onto a new medium. *Simple Traces* is accompanied by *The Notebook*, a rust-covered pad, which—if we are to believe the curator's description—includes a "detailed account of the process."<sup>46</sup> Although self-explanatory, the notepad itself is opaque, wrapped in pink textile. Questions of legibility arise at many levels. The large piece of aesthetically appealing fabric simultaneously discloses some elements of its history and keeps others obscure. The rust recalls environments of physical labour while the complexity of the *shibori* technique remains obscured. The abstract shapes allow for varied associations, from Rorschach tests through satellite imagery and bodily fluids to mandalas. The indeterminacy of the shapes is seemingly the point. It is clear that the object was created by hand and with care, a physical engagement with the material remnants of industrial work. The distance between art medium and the remnants of post-industrial labour is literally removed by wrapping work in art, by imprinting the past on the present.

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45 Aneta Szyłak, "Anna Królikiewicz. Simple Traces. The Notebook," in Szyłak and Grzonkowska, *Nomus*, 162.

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## About the Author

**Magda Szcześniak** is Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw. Author of *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [Norms of Visuality: Identity in Times of Transition] (2016) and *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce* [Feeling Moved: Upward Mobility and Emotions in Socialist Poland] (2023).



## 2. Re-imagining the Belfast Waterfront

### De-industrialization and Visual Culture in Sailortown and Queen's Island

*Lachlan MacKinnon*

#### Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the Belfast waterfront has emerged as a space where history, identity, and class relationships are contested through visual culture and public history. On one side of the Lagan River is the gleaming Titanic Quarter, home to Titanic Belfast and a closely curated set of visual culture representations of the industrial past. Across the river in Sailortown, the remnants of a vibrant working-class community have established their own neighbourhood institutions to inform visitors of their perspective on the past and the rapidly shifting, post-industrial present. In this chapter, these two locations are mined for examples of visual culture and industrial heritage to give a sense of how such sites provide insight into the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of de-industrialization and regeneration.

**Keywords:** de-industrialization; industrial heritage; visual culture; Northern Ireland; post-conflict; gentrification

“What does this place stand for?” Spatial theorist Doreen Massey poses the question to draw our attention to the multiple layers of place-identity that coexist in cities and neighbourhoods around the world.<sup>1</sup> The landscapes where we live, work, and socialize are not simply bound by lines on a map; they are defined by the extensive networks of meaning attributed to them through the enactment of relationships. The notion is especially useful when considering the histories of places that have been disrupted and reshaped by

1 Doreen Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 10.

economic and urban change through the processes of de-industrialization. There is a dissonance between post-industrial regenerated landscapes, tourist-friendly vistas, gentrified neighbourhoods, and their former existence as places of work, socialization, and solidarity. The dissonance arises as bonds of class and shared experience are displaced by new forms of place attachment. Former industrial workplaces are reimagined as creative spaces or expensive condominiums, for example, while working-class residents are displaced by industrial closure, gentrification, and rental increases. As Jackie Clarke argues, these changes are highly visible forms of economic transition that mask the increasing invisibility of workers and their institutions in post-industrial places.<sup>2</sup> Visual culture offers a lens through which these tensions might be further examined and provides insight into the visible and invisible aspects of these transformations.

The waterfront district in Belfast, Northern Ireland is a space where these sorts of tensions are present in the heritage and visual arts landscape, and through international coverage of a recent high-profile shipyard workers' strike. On July 29, 2019, shipyard workers organized by Unite the Union and GMB, announced their occupation of the Harland and Wolff (H&W) worksite in response to a threatened closure.<sup>3</sup> The famous Belfast shipyard had launched hundreds of vessels in its one hundred and fifty years of operations and now found itself at the heart of a protracted labour dispute that forced the class inequalities of de-industrialization in the city into stark relief. The conflict was rooted in simmering tensions between shipyard workers who sought the continuation of production and employment and an international management firm committed to shuttering or selling the flagging shipyard.

The spectre of class struggle in the middle of what has become known as the "Titanic Quarter" struck a discordant note in the symphony of changes that had buffeted the area since the early 2000s. Over two decades, the place that many dockers and shipyard workers once knew as Queen's Island was redeveloped into a tourist destination based around the local history of the *Titanic*, constructed at H&W between 1909 and 1911. The crown jewel of this effort is "Titanic Belfast"—a £97 million museum that presents the history of that ill-fated voyage to hundreds of thousands of visitors each

2 Jackie Clarke, "Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France," *Modern and Contemporary France* 19, no. 4 (2011): 443–58.

3 Margaret Canning, "Harland and Wolff for Sale as Norwegian Owner Fred Olsen Instigates Restructuring Process," *Belfast Telegraph*, December 21, 2018, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/northern-ireland/harland-and-wolff-for-sale-as-norwegian-owner-fred-olsen-instigates-restructuring-process/37646170.html>.

year.<sup>4</sup> This has become a significant growth pole for the city; the area now also boasts several luxury vehicle dealerships, a science park, film studios, hotels, the SSE Arena, high-end apartments, and even a new campus for Belfast Metropolitan College. These transitions, while present, have been slower to unfold in the working-class neighbourhood of Sailortown, located across the Lagan River, where current and former residents continue to assert their sense of place-identity through the creation of visual culture, working-class heritage, and representations of the industrial past. In each neighborhood, a close reading of the visual landscape reveals overlapping identities, “dangerous” histories of sectarianism and violence, working-class memory, and politics, doing battle with the neo-liberalizing desire to remake such spaces into products for consumption.

The regeneration of the industrial working-class neighbourhoods on the banks of the Lagan have resulted in the emergence of one of the premiere tourist districts in Northern Ireland—boasting Titanic Belfast, the *Game of Thrones* (2011–19) soundstage, various pieces of public art, and myriad corporate headquarters.<sup>5</sup> Behind this veneer of market-friendly heritage, divisions remain. Sectarian memory in Belfast is not as easily erased as those former loyalist murals—once painted on walls that now bear imagery of the *Titanic*.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the weeks-long occupation of H&W by workers

4 The specific historical narratives that are present within Titanic Belfast have been interrogated extensively by historians of Northern Ireland and working-class Belfast. See David Coyles, “Reflections on Titanic Quarter: The Cultural and Material Legacy of an Historic Belfast Brand,” *The Journal of Architecture* 18, no. 3 (2013): 331–63, 332; William J. V. Neill, “The Debasing of Myth: The Privatisation of Titanic Memory in Designing the ‘Post-Conflict’ City,” in *Relaunching the Titanic: Memory and Marketing in the New Belfast*, ed. William J. V. Neill, Michael Murray, and Berna Grist (New York: Routledge, 2014), 63–87; Phil Ramsey, “A Pleasingly Blank Canvas: Urban Regeneration in Northern Ireland and the Titanic Quarter,” *Space and Polity* 17, no. 2 (2013): 164–79.

5 Ipek A. Celik Rappas, “From *Titanic* to *Game of Thrones*: Promoting Belfast as a Global Media Capital,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 41, no. 4 (2019): 539–56, 540; regeneration, in this sense, is not an entirely positive process. As Kaeleigh Herstad reveals, terms such as regeneration, reclamation, and the removal of urban blight have frequently been employed as euphemisms that mask the deeply racial and class-based displacements that occur alongside neoliberal restructuring in de-industrialized cities. See Kaeleigh Herstad, “Reclaiming Detroit: Demolition and Deconstruction in the Motor City,” *The Public Historian* 39, no. 4 (November 2017): 85–113.

6 Pete Hodson, “Titanic Struggle: Memory, Heritage, and Shipyard Deindustrialization in Belfast,” *History Workshop Journal* 87 (2019): 224–49, 227; the nearby Lower Newtownards Road area contains a variety of explicitly sectarian murals depicting scenes from loyalist history and anti-Catholic imagery. As Laura McAtackney reveals, the city has struggled with how to move beyond “aggressive displays of sectionalism and racism while simultaneously retaining the rights of communities to materially articulate their identities.” See Laura McAtackney, “Repercussions of Differential Deindustrialization in the City: Memory and Identity in Contemporary East

resisting the vicissitudes of de-industrialization reveals that class politics remain strong in these parts of the city—even alongside the highly visible representations of “official,” state-driven visual culture that comprise the *Titanic* motif. In this chapter, these crosscurrents are analysed through a range of visual culture examples, urban aesthetics, and industrial heritage in Sailortown and the Titanic Quarter. In each, bottom-up instances of urban visual culture are coupled with the strategies employed by workers during the shipyard occupation to give insight into a set of class identities that may very well be residual, but still provide grit upon which both cultural and economic resistance to de-industrialization and gentrification find traction.

This argument proceeds in three sections. First, the historiography of de-industrialization, gentrification, and the aestheticization of working-class places provides a theoretical grounding. Second, testimonies and analysis of visual culture, heritage sites, and public art in the Titanic Quarter and the nearby working-class neighbourhood of Sailortown offer insight into how these visual signifiers serve to complicate, compliment, or challenge the “safe” historical narratives that have emerged as the result of the state-centred efforts at regeneration. Specifically, they reflect communal responses to what Sean O’Connell has called “the Troubles with a lower-case ‘t’”—the combined histories of de-industrialization and urban redevelopment in Belfast. These responses also require careful attention alongside “the more commonly understood fissures caused by ethno-sectarian identity.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, changes and additions to the built and heritage landscape of these sites are analysed alongside oral history testimony and media accounts of H&W workers. The methodology will give a sense of the symbolic erasure of industrial working-class life and various forms of resistance to that erasure. These include direct action, such as trade union and labour activism, as well as the community-led efforts at working-class commemoration that have been deployed throughout Sailortown. In the end, both reveal how sites of visual culture are highly expressive representations of dramatic economic and socio-political changes. Reading the landscapes in these two Belfast neighbourhoods provides an alternative way of recognizing the scale and scope of de-industrialization on the waterfront. Further, this survey reveals how working-class communities come together through heritage activism

Belfast,” in *Contemporary Archaeology and the City: Creativity, Ruination, and Political Action*, ed. Laura McAtackney and Krysta Ryzewski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 190–210, 201.

7 Sean O’Connell, “The Troubles with a Lower-Case ‘t’: Undergraduates and Belfast’s Difficult History,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (2018): 219–39, 224; Indeed, the sites that were identified in Sailortown and the Titanic Quarter reveal little about sectarian conflict, though these strands were alluded to during several of the oral history interviews.

to produce strategic interventions insisting upon the continued visibility of their place-identities, solidarities, and histories in the face of erasure.<sup>8</sup>

### The Aesthetics of De-industrialization: From Ruin to “Revitalization”

In the decades since the industrial crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, aestheticized images of de-industrialized locales have become ubiquitous. As Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen note, visuals of abandoned homes, hulking industrial ruins, and decrepit empty factories are found in equal measure in the glossy pages of fine art magazines and on websites and online communities around the world.<sup>9</sup> Too frequently, these images cross the line into “ruin porn”—visualizations of urban decline and poverty that are repurposed into spectacle and middle-class voyeurism.<sup>10</sup> On the other end of the spectrum is “the deindustrial sublime”—wherein the empty shells of former workplaces and spaces of production are presented to the viewer in depoliticized terms as cathedrals of bygone industry.<sup>11</sup> This aesthetic is found in representations of post-industrial cities and towns across North America and Europe.<sup>12</sup> It is from within this selection of images, for example, that grooms and brides-to-be may choose to hold their nuptials on the top floors of the historic nineteenth-century H&W offices in Belfast, enjoying a full view of the docklands and surrounding working-class neighbourhoods.<sup>13</sup>

8 Michael Frisch describes heritage activism as one tactic for working-class residents of de-industrializing areas to ensure that their voices, narratives, and political perspectives are taken seriously in the heritage landscape. See Michael Frisch, “De-, Re-, and Post-Industrialization: Industrial Heritage as Contested Memorial Terrain,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 35, no. 3 (September–December 1998): 241–49, 243.

9 Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen, “Imaging Modern Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography,” *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1, no. 1 (2014): 7–23, 7.

10 Fred Vultee, “Finding ‘Porn’ in the Ruin,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2013): 142–45; Andrew Emil Gansky, “‘Ruin Porn’ and the Ambivalence of Decline: Andrew Moore’s Photographs of Detroit,” *Photography and Culture* 7, no. 2 (July 2014): 119–40; Tanya Whitehouse, *How Ruins Acquire Aesthetic Value: Modern Ruins, Ruin Porn, and the Ruin Tradition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

11 Dora Apel, *Beautiful, Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 93.

12 Steven High and David Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 5.

13 “Sail Away to the Perfect Wedding Day,” *Titanic Hotel Belfast*, accessed March 7, 2023, <https://www.titanichotelbelfast.com/weddings-venue-belfast>.

The absence of historical or political awareness in both types of representation is striking; as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, “ruins are not just found, they are made.”<sup>14</sup> Ruin porn and the de-industrial sublime both present industrial ruination for the middle-class gaze. This forms the crux of an ongoing discussion within de-industrialization studies on the class character of the ruin aesthetic.<sup>15</sup> The aestheticization of these sites allows for the performative transgression of class boundaries in ways that are disconnected from the lived experience of displacement or precarity.<sup>16</sup> Displaced workers often engage with the materiality of loss in different ways—collecting mementos of work life, photographs of colleagues and friends, or even inside jokes like a “girlie calendar” rescued from a defunct mine in Cornwall.<sup>17</sup> These practices maintain an experiential place-identity, subverting “empty” representations of the de-industrialized. Steven High writes, “The ruination of the factory itself stands as clear evidence that these old class hierarchies are very much intact. An aesthetic reading, rather than a wider social or political one, misses this fundamental point.”<sup>18</sup> This also rings true in working-class spaces of social and familial interaction. Gentrification in these neighbourhoods represents the same sort of depoliticized industrial aestheticization.

The Belfast waterfront reveals this sort of rhetorical and physical transformation. While the generalities of de-industrialization and economic revitalization resonate with other major urban centres, complicating matters in Belfast is the ever-present historical memory of sectarian conflict. As O’Connell concluded in an earlier study of oral history and working-class memory, in Sailortown, “any project on Belfast history that attempts to focus solely on the troubles with a ‘lower-case t’ will inevitably face the reality of

14 Anne Laura Stoler, “Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (May 2008): 191–219, 201.

15 Tim Strangleman et al. have used “de-industrialization studies” to refer to an interdisciplinary body of work that examines de-industrialization through historical, sociological, economic, and cultural scholarship. See Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon, “Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 7–22, 20.

16 Tim Strangleman, “Smokestack Nostalgia, Ruin Porn, or Working Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 23–37, 30.

17 Hilary Orange, “Humour in the Industrial Workplace: Laughter in the Dry, Geevor Mine, Cornwall,” *The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archaeology* 43, no. 1/2 (2017): 93–104, 100.

18 Steven High, “Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 140–53, 146.



having to factor in, in one way or another, the Troubles.”<sup>19</sup> While the present research on visual culture in Sailortown and the Titanic Quarter did not find any explicitly sectarian examples, the H&W shipyard itself has long been considered a bastion of loyalist support in Northern Ireland, with working-class Protestants from nearby East Belfast historically comprising the majority of the workforce.<sup>20</sup> This connection has remained so strong that expressing political support for the shipbuilding industry was frequently coded and understood as support for loyalist politics.<sup>21</sup> The Titanic Quarter, today, is shorn of representations both of class conflict and of sectarian divisions; this is purposefully so, as part of a broader state effort to re-envision Belfast as a “post-conflict city.”<sup>22</sup> Despite a few examples of artistic installations where workers are depicted, Pete Hodson’s oral history work reveals how many of the men and women who lived and worked in the surrounding streets and neighbourhoods now describe feeling out of place and out of touch with a space so clearly produced for tourist consumption.<sup>23</sup>

### Surveying Visual Culture in Post-industrial Queen’s Island and Sailortown

The Titanic Quarter emerged as the result of a £47 million real estate deal wherein Dublin-based firm Harcourt Developments purchased 185 acres of H&W land from Fred Olsen and Co along the Lagan.<sup>24</sup> Development documents reveal that the plans for the site were directly linked to popular perceptions of its industrial history. The first edition of *Titanic Quarter* magazine, published by Harcourt in 2007 as a means of drumming up

19 O’Connell, “The Troubles with a Lower-Case ‘t,’” 239.

20 While not explicitly sectarian, there was one plaque located on the front of St. Joseph’s Church in Sailortown that memorializes two children killed in a car bombing during the Troubles.

21 Hodson, “Titanic Struggle,” 227–28; in oral history interviews, this was also articulated; one H&W employee reflected that this perception required some counteracting during the 2019 “Save Our Shipyard” protests, see Joe Passmore, interview with L. MacKinnon, May 7, 2021.

22 William J. V. Neill describes the herculean efforts of bureaucrats, image-makers, and marketing officials in branding Belfast with the “post-conflict” moniker. The state went so far as to remove funding for an arts magazine in 2005, after they published a counter-representation of the “post-conflict” city. See William J. V. Neill, “Return to Titanic and Lost in the Maze: The Search for Representation in ‘Post-Conflict’ Belfast,” *Space and Polity* 10, no. 2 (August 2006): 109–20, 112.

23 Hodson, “Titanic Struggle,” 240.

24 Una McCaffrey, “Harcourt behind £47m Belfast Shipyard Land Deal,” *The Irish Times* (Dublin), June 18, 2003, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/harcourt-behind-47m-belfast-shipyard-land-deal-1.362955>.

support for the venture, was explicit in its intentions. The introduction reads, “The history of Queen’s Island and Harland and Wolff shipyard is as grand as the ships it once built—among them the tragic Titanic.”<sup>25</sup> Despite the inclusion of historic photographs depicting workers walking to the docks with lunch-pails in hand, there are few signs that the site includes a still-operating shipyard. When developers did remark upon this, it was clear that the continued operations of H&W were seen as a nuisance—a barrier to the achievement of the site’s full potential. The shipyard and its workers were firmly, in the view of the site’s developers, vestiges of the past. Their displacement would be an opportunity, as noted in one Harcourt Development publication:

The opportunity to redevelop TQ came when Harland and Wolff shrank greatly in size—employing a mere 300 people, compared to the 40,000 at its height—abandoning most of the docks, and leaving one mile of valuable waterfront development land.<sup>26</sup>

The visual landscape of the Titanic Quarter reveals what is rendered visible and invisible in the process of regenerating this area of Belfast (see appendix 2.1). Recognizing how official forms of historical memory are established requires a close reading of this curated heritage landscape—in this instance, indicating visual artworks that were erected with the support of the developers and the City of Belfast. Unsurprisingly, many of the examples correspond directly to the overarching *Titanic* nautical theme, while others bear imagery from the *Game of Thrones* entertainment franchise. Of the remaining examples, the *Docker’s Rest* mural, the *RiverBox*, and the Sustrans portrait bench include some working-class symbolism. The bench includes a stylized anonymous “shipyard worker” alongside the more identifiable Charlie Chaplin and a waiter who served on the *SS Nomadic*, while the mural represents nine stylized faces of working-class men from internationally renowned artist Terry Bradley’s “Men of Sailortown” series.<sup>27</sup> Thus, official popular culture and entertainment imagery has been privileged over working-class memory.

25 *Titanic Quarter: Regenerating Belfast* (Belfast: 3FoxInternational and Harcourt Developments, 2007), 6.

26 *Titanic Quarter*, 15.

27 Lauren Harte, “A Brush with History for Titanic Mural Artists,” *Belfast Telegraph*, May 31, 2019, 25, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/theatre-arts/a-brush-with-history-for-titanic-mural-artists/38165121.html>.



Figure 2.1: The *Blinks* Sculpture. Photo: Angela Poulter, 2020.

One particularly interesting piece, the *Blinks* sculpture of 2005, was installed by artist Peter Nelson with design input from four former shipyard workers. This example refers to the social history of the experience of H&W workers in the modern era. It includes the names of various trades (joiner, fitter, painter), as well as the stylized “after-image” caused by ocular damage from the welding process, reflected as a cobweb pattern on the sculpture. The message is clear; while certain aspects of industrial work may conclude with

the shuttering of a mill or a locked gate, the experiences of injured workers are not so neatly consigned to the past. In this instance, the irreversible damage to workers' bodies through the processes of industrial work remain in the post-industrial era. This sculpture is one of the few sites in the Titanic Quarter that does not disconnect the earlier history of production at the site from the glossy sheen of the modern landscape. This is notable as it is also the only piece that has had its design influenced by the artist's collaboration with former shipyard workers. As a result, it speaks to working-class sensibilities surrounding de-industrialization, post-industrial transformation, and the bodily impact of industrial work.

The six-story Titanic Belfast punctuates the surrounding skyline with four distinct aluminium edifices. The modernist style of the structure stands in contrast to the brown brick buildings just across the river in Sailortown.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the Lagan itself represents a visible rupture between the industrial past and the post-industrial present. The Titanic Quarter, or Queen's Island, once housed the sprawling shipyard and industrial workspaces that drew upon labourers from Sailortown and other neighbourhoods in East Belfast. With the regeneration of the site, new class demarcations are made visible—former industrial buildings on one side of the river contrasted with the gleaming hulk of the museum on the other. As time passes and Sailortown continues its own transformation, these distinctions will become less noticeable. In the six years between 2015 and 2021, development on the Sailortown side of the river has dramatically increased—slowly erasing the visible manifestations of working-class culture and the industrial past in that neighbourhood.

Elsewhere in the Quarter, the influence of the state and its development goals, while invisible to the casual observer or pedestrian traffic, have been highly influential. The state and private industry have worked to re-arrange the visual environment of the Quarter to ensure that visitors are presented with depoliticized representations of the past that highlight growth, economic development, and shared achievement, while rendering invisible the lived history of sectarian or class conflict on the waterfront and within the shipyard. Surrounding the museum are the *SS Nomadic*, the last of the White Star fleet, and other preserved sites related to the construction of the *Titanic*.<sup>29</sup> Directly adjacent is the "Titanic Hotel," a boutique property located in the former H&W Drawing Offices and

28 As new buildings are erected and regeneration continues unabated, these contrasts become less and less visible.

29 These include the Dock and Pump House and the Titanic Slipway.

Headquarters, and Titanic Studios—all used as filming locations for HBO, Playtone, and Universal. This connection between film and landscape is an interesting addition to the visual appropriation of the Belfast waterfront. In this form of re-use, the waterfront is rendered a backdrop in fictional storytelling—further divorcing the site from the real relationships of capital, work, and development that have shaped its transition. These uses can also influence the landscape directly. The popularity of *Game of Thrones*, for example, has resulted in an ongoing stained-glass art exhibit bearing imagery from the show at locations across the city. Nearby, a “castle” used in filming has also been left standing and is now visible from the Titanic Slipway.<sup>30</sup>

Contrasting this aesthetic sensibility are Samson and Goliath, the 106 m and 96 m tall yellow cranes that are iconic of Belfast’s skyline. They are perhaps the visual signifiers that most intersect with the displaced working-class character of Queen’s Island/Titanic Quarter. Though these are classified as “architectural or historic interest,” they are not officially listed heritage properties, and are kept in working condition by H&W.<sup>31</sup> The cranes, still operational in a working shipyard, ironically represent the continuation of industry in the Quarter despite the design features of the landscape that seek to relegate those histories and experiences wholly to the past. Despite their fame, this dissonance between political economy and the heritage landscape caused many workers to worry that the cranes would be demolished if H&W were to close.<sup>32</sup>

There are, of course, ways other than the erection of multi-million-dollar museums, boutique shops and hotels, and other types of sanctioned place-making to shift the messaging of landscapes. Graffiti, guerrilla art, public performance, and *in situ* visual culture all provide opportunities to subvert dominant heritage narratives, deromanticize representations of the past, and assert working-class memory in the face of erasure.<sup>33</sup> These

30 See Ipek A. Celik Rappas and Stefano Baschiera, “Fabricating ‘Cool’ Heritage for Northern Ireland: *Game of Thrones* Tourism,” *Popular Culture* 53, no. 3 (June 2020): 648–66, 650; and “Game of Thrones Glass Windows in Belfast,” *NI Explorer*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://niexplorer.com/latest/game-of-thrones-stained-glass-belfast>.

31 Dennis Kennedy, *Belfast’s Giants: 36 Views of Samson and Goliath* (Belfast: Ormeau Books, 2015), 3.

32 “Harland and Wolff, What Will Happen to Belfast’s Yellow Cranes?,” *BBC News*, August 7, 2019, accessed April 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-49237755>.

33 Mark Allan Rhodes II, William R. Price, and Amy Walker, “Introduction: Geographies of Post-Industrial Memory, Place, and Heritage,” in *Geographies of Post-Industrial Memory, Place, and Heritage*, ed. Mark Allan Rhodes II, William R. Price, and Amy Walker (London: Routledge, 2020), 1–20, 12.

forms of place-making represent a re-assertion of cultural identities that have been occluded in the turn to cosmopolitan, post-industrial Belfast. In contrast to the strictly curated and surveyed space of the Titanic Quarter, some of the most accessible forms of community-based visual culture and heritage representations are found in the adjacent working-class area of Sailortown.

The Sailortown area was once a bustling working-class neighbourhood with a population of more than five thousand people by the 1930s, many of whom worked in the docklands. In terms of demography, the neighbourhood was mixed with a slight Protestant majority.<sup>34</sup> The historic and community fabric of Sailortown was disrupted between the late 1960s and 1980s, when the majority of the neighbourhood was slowly demolished to make way for the construction of the Belfast Urban Motorway.<sup>35</sup> After demolition, little was left beyond a few terraced houses, pubs, and St. Joseph's Church.<sup>36</sup> Despite this, there remains a strong sense of social cohesion that emerges primarily from the emotional connection that the Sailortown diaspora—now spread across the city—continues to feel towards the place and its history. Former and current residents of Sailortown achieved some degree of political cohesion in 1999, when the Sailortown Cultural and Historical Society (SCHS) was formed as a “cross community heritage group” that would “caretake, chronicle, and celebrate the unique history and culture of the dockland community.”<sup>37</sup> Despite this mandate, one of the first major efforts of the SCHS was to challenge the decision of the Catholic Church to deconsecrate and sell St. Joseph's Church. This effort has solidified local perception that the organization's members are associated with the Roman Catholic/nationalist community.

34 Fionnuala Fagan and Isobel Anderson, “Stories of the City: An Artistic Representation of Sailortown's Oral History,” *Oral History* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 108–16, 109; O'Connell, “The Troubles with a Lower-Case ‘t,’” 227, footnote 31.

35 Wesley Johnson, *The Belfast Urban Motorway: Engineering, Ambition, and Social Conflict* (Newtownards: Colourpoint Books, 2014), 94.

36 Liz Thomas, “St. Joseph's Church: The People's Heartland,” in *For My Descendants and Myself, a Nice and Pleasant Abode: Agency, Microhistory and Built Environment*, ed. Gören Tagesson, Per Cornell, Mark Gardiner, Liz Thomas, and Katherine Weikert (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing, 2020), 172–79, 174.

37 Neil Johnson, “Sailortown Residents to Head Home,” *Belfast Telegraph*, May 25, 2000, 4, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/sailortown-residents-to-head-home/28298161.html>; Pat Benson, “Historical Sailortown Church Could Be Centrepiece for Developed Dockland,” *Belfast Telegraph*, October 28, 2000, 12, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/historical-sailortown-church-could-be-centrepiece-for-developed-dockland/28270758.html>.



Figure 2.2: *Wheels of Progress*. Photo: Angela Poulter, 2020.

Seventeen sites of visual culture in post-industrial Sailortown have been identified through visits in 2015, 2018, and 2020–21 (see appendix 2.2). The Laganside Corporation, a “non-departmental public body” in Northern Ireland, was responsible for funding and implementing five of these projects through a public art strategy in the service of the corporation’s broader mandate “to revitalize 140 ha of brownfields on both banks of the Lagan

River into an attractive space for business and people.”<sup>38</sup> As a result, these five instances are stylistically more resonant with those found within the Titanic Quarter than with other examples found in Sailortown. *The Flying Angel* at Princes Dock, for example, is a large, professionally designed modernist metal sculpture; its aesthetics are quite different from the painted murals installed by community groups elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

An exception to this is Peter Rooney’s *Wheels of Progress*, located on Corporation Street under the cross harbour and railway bridge. The piece comprises a series of black-and-white photographs set into stylized car mirrors depicting life in Sailortown before displacement. In addition to these photographs, there are several depictions of passport stamps from around the world installed on the concrete footings of the overhead bridge. The title *Wheels of Progress* conforms to the overarching impulse of the Laganside Corporation. However, the rear-view photographs, coupled with their location under a highway bridge, provide a spatial challenge to the progressive character of neighbourhood displacement and the dispersal of residents. Part of the reason for this is that the photographs, bearing the smiling faces of former residents, were provided to the artist by SCHS. The content and placement of the photographs, providing a glimpse of the neighbourhood before the motorway, invite passers-by to reflect upon the processes of community disruption. For former Sailortown residents, this can be a deeply personal experience; George Eagleson, who used to live in the area, reflects:

Underneath some of the bridges—the photographs are on the pillars. And people that I knew are actually up there [in the photos] [...] And people will look at that and say, “Well, I wonder what they are?” [...] And I feel sad that there’s no inscriptions, you know, “The Residents of Sailortown” [...] They’re just photographs there. And [shakes head] whoever’s going to know them?<sup>39</sup>

In 2006, the Sailortown Regeneration Group (SRG) emerged as an umbrella organization for a variety of smaller community groups including the SCHS. They immediately became involved with the ongoing efforts to save the

<sup>38</sup> Philip Boland, John Bronte, and Jenny Muir, “On the Waterfront: Neoliberal Urbanism and the Politics of Public Benefit,” *Cities* 61 (2017): 117–27, 120; Laganside Corporation, “Annual Report, 1999–2000,” 25.

<sup>39</sup> George Eagleson, interviewed by Andrew Molloy, April 2, 2014, 11:10, accessed April 13, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okqKHjz7Uxo&ab\\_channel=AndrewMolloy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okqKHjz7Uxo&ab_channel=AndrewMolloy).



chapel, along with a host of other community-oriented activities.<sup>40</sup> On the heels of this successful campaign, the SRG were granted a long-term lease of the property by the Church. The site was in disrepair, with water damage and pigeons having taken up residence inside the building, prompting the group's successful application for funding to conduct significant repairs and continued maintenance. SRG worked closely with a variety of state funding organizations to raise money for the modernization and maintenance of the church and other efforts to generate economic and cultural activity.<sup>41</sup> The group was involved in several of the visual culture installations in Sailortown, such as a large "This was once Little Italy" banner and three information boards that include photographs, graphic design features, and song lyrics. Terry McKeown, Project Manager at SRG, describes a forward-looking focus for development within the neighbourhood:

Really what I learned when I came down here was that Sailortown wasn't even on the map. It wasn't [...] in any of the area planning, it was outside all the red lines. It really was, I mean it was marooned not just by the motorway, but it was marooned in terms of city-wide planning, in terms of any regeneration plans, in terms of any masterplans [...]. So we're now on the map at long last, and we're getting into more maps [smiles] [...] campaigning's one thing, protesting's one thing, but I think you have to take a more strategic view as well.<sup>42</sup>

The heritage activities of the SRG represent only one element of their remit. Ongoing collaborations with the Titanic Foundation—now the Belfast Maritime Trust—and the Belfast Harbour "Maritime Mile initiative" reveal how SRG is treading a careful line. Community organizers, residents of Sailortown, and academics within the SRG frequently partner with these larger state-sponsored organizations to try to influence the development of the waterfront. While this can be a fraught process, it allows people within the neighbourhood to take advantage of ongoing large-scale development projects while shaping how the local culture and heritage of the area are displayed.<sup>43</sup> This process involves not only opening lines of communication with state-level development agencies, but also connecting with smaller-scale

40 Terry McKeown, interview with Angela Poulter, May 18, 2021.

41 Thomas, "The People's Heartland," 175.

42 Terry McKeown, interview with Angela Poulter, May 18, 2021.

43 "Belfast Context – Sailortown Regeneration," accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.sailortownregeneration.com/belfast-context>; "Maritime Belfast – The Maritime Mile," accessed April 13, 2023, <https://maritimebelfast.com/destination-development/the-maritime-mile/>.

radical grassroots projects such as the Streetspace Sailortown. This project, led by Augustina Martire, uses “graphic anthropology to investigate Sailortown’s past through the stories of people.”<sup>44</sup> This collaborative approach ensures the continued visibility of the neighbourhood’s working-class history while operating alongside developers to influence the shape of economic and social transition.

In contrast to SRG, SHIP is another local organization dedicated to commemorating and memorializing the radical histories of Sailortown with a more pronounced focus on trade union and left-wing activism. SHIP was created in 2006 to “collect, collate and record information that will promote and inform heritage projects, encouraging the development of a shared history.”<sup>45</sup> The organization facilitates examples of visual culture that focus more expressly on docker and carter work, health and safety on the docks, the broader maritime heritage of North Belfast, working-class education, and important trade union figures in the area’s history.

In 2007, SHIP erected a mural on Pilot Street celebrating the life of the docker and carter.<sup>46</sup> The mural included a plaque detailing loss of life through work on the docks and the continued impact of this work on the bodies of former employees. The mural featured imagery of workers on the docks, Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) symbolism, and the stylized faces of James Connolly, Jim Larkin, and Winifred Carney—famous Belfast trade unionists, socialists, and republicans. This mural was recommissioned, and additions were made in 2015 to show a variety of photographs and images from North Belfast’s maritime history, shipping, and work on the docks. The union symbol remains, as do the three original trade unionists, but they are now joined by William “Billy” McMullin and John Quinn, both leading proponents of trade unionism on the docks.

Also in 2007, the organization erected a commemorative plaque at the Dockers’ Club describing the threat of death and injury experienced by dockworkers. Two years later, another plaque was erected at McKenna’s Bar on Dock Street explaining the harsh school system endured by dockers and their families. In 2017, SHIP added a second mural detailing the history of

44 This is a digital humanities project that uses layer maps to present snapshots of Sailortown in 1963, 2020, and looks forward to plans for the area in 2030. It matches this historical approach with plans for redevelopment of the space that connects with its history. Some examples include plans for co-living housing, an oral history storytelling centre, and a women’s shelter. See *Streetspace-Sailortown* for more information, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://streetspace-sailortown.com/>.

45 “SHIP—Our Mission,” accessed April 13, 2023, <http://www.shipbelfastarchive.com/>.

46 Carters were transport workers who moved merchandise unloaded at the docks into the city.



Figure 2.3: Pilot Street Mural. Photo: Angela Poulter, 2020.

trade union activism in Belfast. SHIP erected another plaque on Corporation Street in 2019 focusing on the history of the ITGWU and international connections with several American trade unions. While the mural is visible to road traffic, the plaques are only legible to pedestrians. SHIP arranges various walking tours to these sites, usually attended by former residents of Sailortown, Queen's University of Belfast students, tourists, or others with a specific interest in the history of the neighbourhood. Unlike the

attractions in the Titanic Quarter, it is unlikely that these site visits would attract international tourists who do not already have some connection to Sailortown or its history.

Brian Quinn and Liam McCormack, two former residents of Sailortown involved with SHIP, described the organization's mandate explicitly in terms of the maintenance of working-class and community memory in Sailortown. Both men grew up in the neighbourhood, and McCormack worked on-and-off at the docks until his retirement in 1997. Both described the importance of the walking tours. Quinn reflected:

There's probably about twenty spots that we stop during the walking tour [...] we start at the *Flying Angel* and we show a photograph of what used to be there, it was called the Chapel Sheds, then we come round into the American Bar, we've a photograph of the American Bar from the 1940s. And then we go to Garmoyle Street, and there's four original houses there, they were built about 1850. We have photographs of what was on the other side of the street and it's now just a Department of Environment yard, so people can look and see what was there and then we wander back into Sailortown and we finish at the mural in Pilot Street.<sup>47</sup>

As Quinn describes, visual culture within Sailortown is used to usher visitors through the neighbourhood and communicate the memory of work on the docks and the Sailortown diaspora. The visibility of these sites and their explicit connection to radical politics and trade unionism represent a direct challenge to the sort of cultural and political erasure that has happened across the river. Such interventions are not only symbols of the past but are expressly utilized in the present by existing communities as an assertion of relevance and potency.

Comparisons between the visual landscape of Sailortown and the Titanic Quarter across the river are revealing. In the Titanic Quarter, most of the curated sites harken the intentional portrayal of a "New Belfast" largely disconnected from the history of dockworkers, shipyard workers, their organizers, and their past and present struggles. In Sailortown, installations are more mixed. The activities of the Laganside Corporation, Belfast Harbour, and the presence of various official installations intersect with the meanings of those found within the Titanic Quarter, drawing Sailortown into a broader re-imaging of the entire waterfront region. Contesting this, however, are the continued activities of the two primary cultural heritage organizations SRG

<sup>47</sup> Brian Quinn and Liam McCormack, interview with Angela Poulter, July 6, 2021.

and SHIP. SRG has applied a regeneration focus to their work in Sailortown, coupling their ongoing efforts at revitalizing St. Joseph's Church with state-led efforts at economic and cultural development; in this way, McKeown believes that they can incorporate the working-class history of Sailortown and its residents into the creation of the new waterfront district. SHIP, however, has applied a more direct approach; their interventions are nakedly political, visually insisting upon the relevance of the labour and socialist history within the neighbourhood, highlighting non-sectarian working-class politics, and cementing organizational allegiances with the international trade union movement. In each instance, while the organizations express a keenness to work across communities, visual culture and heritage activism in Sailortown includes what O'Connell describes as a "green tinge"—or a slight nationalist bent to the neighbourhood's historical memory.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, questions about class, visibility, and organizational power in these areas are not simply parochial concerns of historical inclusion. Rather, as the H&W shipyard occupation of 2019 reveals, they remain central to the identities of men and women who continue to live and work in these areas of Belfast.

### **Direct Action in the Titanic Quarter: H&W Occupation and Working-Class Memory**

After a number of years with H&W posting lower profits than expected, coupled with a significant staff reduction and £6 million operating loss in 2016, the shipyard owners announced in 2018 that they were entertaining purchase offers.<sup>49</sup> The proposed sale would include the ninety-acre site, located in the heart of the Titanic Quarter, including the building dock.<sup>50</sup> Although H&W reassured workers that this move would not affect day-to-day operations in the short term, shipyard employees and their trade unions grew increasingly worried as a buyer failed to materialize and the company moved towards bankruptcy.<sup>51</sup>

48 O'Connell, "The Troubles with a Lower-Case 't,'" 229.

49 Canning, "Harland and Wolff for Sale."

50 Jehan Ashmore, "For Sale as Harland & Wolff's Norwegian Owner Fred Olsen Instigates Restructuring Process," *Afloat: Ireland's Sailing, Boating, and Maritime Magazine*, December 21, 2018, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://afloat.ie/port-news/belfast-lough/item/41371-harland-wolff-for-sale-as-norwegian-owner-fred-olsen-instigates-restructuring-process>.

51 Frances McDonnell, "Harland and Wolff Owner Files for Bankruptcy," *The Irish Times* (Dublin), June 26, 2019, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/manufacturing/harland-and-wolff-owner-files-for-bankruptcy-1.3938201>.

Unite the Union and GMB called for government intervention, up to and including the re-nationalization of the yard.<sup>52</sup> It was soon clear that this was politically unviable. On July 29, 2019, workers held a highly visible mass protest at the H&W work site. They entered the yard, locked the gates, and continued the protest picket throughout the night, asserting that this would only end with a deal to keep the shipyard operating. Trade unionists sought support from within the community and launched a social media campaign. #SaveOurShipyard and photographs from the picket line trended on Twitter in Northern Ireland on July 30 as labour leaders took to the media to declare their opposition to closure. This represented not only a symbolic rejection of erasure and invisibility, but an assertion of political will and organizational power on behalf of the workers at the Titanic Quarter's operating shipyard. In an oral history interview, labour organizer Susan Fitzgerald described the public fanfare and international visibility as an explicit goal of the union action:

Everyone wanted to come up and get their picture taken at the occupation and that you know it was like a cause célèbre in Belfast, you actually had celebrities, different people coming, a tourist bus that goes through Belfast wound its way around sometimes [laughs] so tourists got to see the occupation, it was quite incredible actually.<sup>53</sup>

While different from the heritage installations discussed above, it is notable that the visible expression of working-class ire was the point of this type of protest. Social media users from around the world opened their Instagram and Twitter feeds to be met with images and clips from an industrial action in Northern Ireland. Striking workers began a poster campaign in Belfast, where they distributed images of the shipyard and Save Our Shipyard slogans to local businesses. Joe Passmore describes a carnival atmosphere at the picket line, with visitors from across Europe arriving daily to learn about the strike, take photos, and share experiences on social media. He recalls:

We had visitors from, we had trade unionists who came over from Germany, [...] You'd [have] people who jumped on a ferry from Scotland, came

52 Frances McDonnell, "Northern Unions Call for Boris Johnson to Nationalize Harland & Wolff," *The Irish Times* (Dublin), July 25, 2019, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/manufacturing/northern-unions-call-for-boris-johnson-to-nationalise-harland-wolff-1.3967534>.

53 Susan Fitzgerald, interview with L. MacKinnon, April 16, 2021.

into Belfast and walked up to our gates just to say that they'd been there. Backpackers who were going round the world *had* to be at the gates of Harland and Wolff, *had* to go and say "history was made here, and we, I was there." [...] People came from the four corners.<sup>54</sup>

In a highly symbolic intervention, striking workers repurposed the Samson and Goliath cranes to bear their message of protest. This action clashed deliberately with the sanctioned heritage efforts within the district. Passmore describes:

We've two massive cranes in Belfast, they oversee the whole city. And we deemed that if we are in charge of this yard, if we take over this yard, we want the whole of Belfast to know we're angry and let them know that there's a protest going on here so why not use these cranes which in effect probably are the biggest billboards in the city, use them to effect. So we made, I asked the guys to get a banner and see what you can do, and I left it to them, I didn't do anything. They come out with this massive banner that hung over this crane. They installed floodlights round it. This is when you have tradesmen coming together and deciding [slight laugh], we're gonna make a mark here, you couldn't ask for better.

...

On that morning we hung the banner from the crane, so the whole of Belfast knew something was gonna happen.<sup>55</sup>

As protests continued, the corporate situation at H&W became more precarious. Company representatives announced on August 5, 2019 that the firm was entering into administration as part of ongoing bankruptcy proceedings.<sup>56</sup> "Barring a miracle, [H&W] is unlikely to reopen," insisted the *Financial Times*.<sup>57</sup>

After nine weeks, a surprise deal was announced on October 1, 2019. InfraStrata, a UK-based energy and industrial concern, revealed that they committed to purchasing H&W for £6 million and would maintain

54 Joe Passmore, interview with L. MacKinnon, April 9, 2021.

55 Joe Passmore, interview with L. MacKinnon, May 7, 2021.

56 Jasper Jolly, "Harland and Wolff Expected to Go into Administration," *The Guardian* (London), August 5, 2019, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/aug/05/harland-and-wolff-shipyard-expected-to-go-into-administration-belfast>.

57 Vincent Boland, "Demise of Harland and Wolff Strikes at Belfast's Identity," *Financial Times* (London), August 7, 2019, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/b751bcda-b85c-11e9-8a88-aa6628ac896c>.



Figure 2.4: Save Our Shipyard. Photo: Pacemaker Press, 29-07-2019.

operations in Belfast.<sup>58</sup> Representatives from Unite and GMB were elated; workers have achieved a “landmark victory” read the GMB press release. Denis Walker, a senior organizer with the union, reflected, “Not prepared to watch their yard moth balled or picked over by asset strippers, workers took the brave decision to stand together to save their jobs for the current workforce and for generations yet to come.”<sup>59</sup>

The question posed at the beginning of this chapter (What does this place stand for?) is essential for understanding the shifts experienced by men and women living through historic changes in the Belfast waterfront. In Sailortown and the Titanic Quarter, visual culture has become a battleground upon which the contested nature of memory in each neighbourhood is revealed. Contrasting narratives about regeneration, industrial history, working-class identity, and sectarianism struggle to coexist, with each being informed by a variety of state and local actors. A central tension is between the development state, which seeks a visual landscape that flattens conflict and conforms with the marketable demands of global tourism, and working-class communities facing economic and cultural displacement,

<sup>58</sup> “Harland and Wolff Sold to U.K. Firm, Saving It from Closure,” *The Irish Times* (Dublin), October 1, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> “Landmark Victory for Harland and Wolff Workers as Yard Saved,” *GMB*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/landmark-victory-harland-and-wolff-workers-yard-saved>.



first through de-industrialization and then by cultural and symbolic erasure. In this chapter, we are confronted with several tactics of resistance. Organizations such as the SRG and SHIP in Sailortown work, in different ways, towards a heritage and built landscape that retains some semblance of connection to the history of working-class life in the neighbourhood. In the Titanic Quarter, sites of visual culture have largely been erected in favour of state-driven narratives. Shipyard workers have asserted their resistance to erasure and invisibility in other ways, drawing upon the long history of trade unionism and class conflict on the waterfront and staging a successful and internationally visible strike against closure in 2019. These conflicts are ongoing. Nevertheless, recognizing the ways that visual culture can be used as a tool to respond to marginalization and invisibility in the face of economic transition amid ongoing de-industrialization remains important in Belfast and in cities facing similar challenges.

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### **About the Author**

**Lachlan MacKinnon** is Associate Professor of History and Canada Research Chair in Post-Industrial Communities at Cape Breton University, Canada. His research focuses on working-class experiences of industrial decline, oral histories of economic transition, and visual culture in de-industrializing and post-industrial spaces.

## Appendix 2.1: Visual Culture Survey in the Post-industrial Titanic Quarter

Item	Location	Description	Date
"Glass of Thrones" <sup>60</sup>	Lagan Weir, Odyssey Point, <i>SS Nomadic</i> , Titanic Slipway, and <i>HMS Caroline</i>	Five glass panels, part of a series of six forming a trail along the Maritime Mile and bearing themes from the television programme <i>Game of Thrones</i> . Unveiled by Tourism Ireland to celebrate ten years of filming in Northern Ireland and production of the programme at Titanic Studios.	2019
"Belfast Buoys" <sup>61</sup>	Abercorn Basin	Three ca. 80-year-old buoys, originally used by mariners to find safe channel to and from port. Restored to their original colours by the Commissioners of Irish Lights and moved to the Titanic Quarter from St. Anne's Cathedral Gardens under the aegis of Maritime Belfast, Titanic Quarter Ltd and Belfast City Council.	May 2019
<i>Titanic Kit</i> <sup>62</sup>	Abercorn Basin, Belfast Harbour Marina	13.5-metre-tall steel and bronze sculpture by Tony Stallard; depicts recognizable Titanic components and structured in similar fashion to a children's model kit. Funded by Titanic Quarter and Arts and Business NI.	2009
Sustrans portrait bench	Hamilton Dock	Wooden bench and three full-sized steel silhouette portraits of figures associated with the <i>SS Nomadic</i> – a shipyard worker, a French waiter, and Charlie Chaplin – adjacent to the <i>SS Nomadic</i> visitor attraction. Part of a UK-wide Sustrans public art initiative, in conjunction with Belfast City Council.	2013

60 "Glass of Thrones Walking Trail," *Game of Thrones Tours*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://gameofthronestours.com/glass-of-thrones/>; "Glass of Thrones Trail Map," *Visit Belfast*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://visitbelfast.com/article/glass-of-thrones-trail-map/>.

61 "The Belfast Buoys," *Maritime Belfast*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://maritimebelfast.com/our-heritage/the-belfast-buoys/>.

62 "Titanic Kit," *Titanic Memorials*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.titanicmemorials.co.uk/post/memorial/kit+Belfast/>.

Item	Location	Description	Date
<i>Docker's Rest</i> <sup>63</sup>	Titanic Belfast, Hickson Point	Mural depicting working-class men from Sailortown and the docks; based on painting by Terry Bradley, reproduction by Friz (Marian Noone).	May 2019
<i>Titanica</i> <sup>64</sup>	Titanic Belfast	Sculpture by Rowan Gillespie; depicts a diving female form, intended to represent traditional imagery on the prow of a ship. Large steel sign: cut out letters mounted into the pavement reading	2012
TITANIC	Titanic Belfast	"TITANIC," designed by Titanic Belfast architects, Eric R. Kuhne and Associates and Todd Architects.	2012
<i>RiverBox</i> <sup>65</sup>	Off Queen's Road	Temporary audio-visual art installation <i>All the Things We Are</i> , housed in three repurposed shipping containers. The piece uses conversations with dock workers, sailors, local residents and others to inspire music, song, and film that reflect on the emotional geography of the port, a space of comings and goings. Created by Dumbworld as part of "Embrace the Place," a Tourism NI and Arts Council of Northern Ireland project to animate key tourism sites.	Launched August 2019
Titanic keel plate <sup>66</sup>	Off Queen's Road	Alongside slipway number 3; replica keel plate to commemorate laying of the Titanic keel plate in 1909.	2009
Titanic Slipway memorials <sup>67</sup>	Off Queen's Road	Glass panels inscribed with the names of each of the victims of the Titanic disaster and eight men killed during the construction and launch of the Titanic.	Undated

63 "A Brush with History for Titanic Mural Artists," *Belfast Telegraph*, May 31, 2019, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/theatre-arts/a-brush-with-history-for-titanic-mural-artists-38165121.html>; "New Terry Bradley and Friz Mural Unveiled at Titanic Belfast," *NI Explorer*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://niexplorer.com/latest/titanic-mural-belfast-terry-bradley-friz>.

64 "Titanica," *Titanic Memorials*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.titanicmemorials.co.uk/post/memorial/titanica/>.

65 "The Riverbox on the Maritime Mile," *Maritime Belfast*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://maritimebelfast.com/riverbox/>; "Tourism NI and the Arts Council Join Forces to Launch a Spectacular Arts Programme," *Arts Council of Northern Ireland*, accessed April 13, 2023, <http://artscouncil-ni.org/news/tourismni-arts-council-join-forces-to-launch-spectacular-arts-programme>.

66 "Titanic Keel Plate," *Titanic Memorials*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.titanicmemorials.co.uk/post/memorial/titanic-keel+plate+belfast/>.

67 "Titanic Slipway Memorials," *Titanic Memorials*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.titanicmemorials.co.uk/post/memorial/titanic+slipway+memorials/>.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Date</b>
<i>Blinks</i> sculpture <sup>68</sup>	Queen's Road, Channel Commercial Park	Welded-metal sculpture, painted yellow. Trades such as joiner, fitter, painter are featured and the sculpture references ocular damage that results from welding work. Installed by artist Peter Nelson, this piece was designed and constructed by former shipyard welders and dedicated as "an appreciation and acknowledgement of the skills of the Harland and Wolff workforce."	May 2005

68 "Blinks," *Belfast Harbour*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.belfast-harbour.co.uk/corporate/public-art>.



## Appendix 2.2: Visual Culture Survey in Post-industrial Sailortown

Item	Location	Description	Date
<i>St. Brendan's Discovery of America</i> <sup>69</sup>	Garmoyle Street, Stella Maris Hostel	Mosaic depicting St Brendan crossing the Atlantic ca. 600 CE. Originally created by Kinney Designs in 1990 for display in Rotterdam, Holland, it was subsequently re-sited to the exterior façade of the hostel by the Laganside Corporation.	Re-sited here in 2000; currently covered at time of writing.
"Dockers Corner" Commemorative Plaque <sup>70</sup>	Dock Street, McKenna's Bar	Describes the history of the deep-sea dockers casual work "schooling" system, hazardous working conditions endured, and their affiliation with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). Erected by the Shared History Interpretive Project (SHIP). Replaced an original plaque dedicated May 1, 2009.	Rededicated June 23, 2017
Five Trade Union Campaigners Commemorative Plaque	Dock Street, McKenna's Bar	Tribute to Winifred Carney, James Connolly, James Larkin, John Quinn, and William McMullen, key figures in social and political events in Sailortown, 1900s–1910s. Erected by SHIP and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.	Unveiled June 23, 2017
<i>Welcome to Sailortown</i> <sup>71</sup>	Short Street	Spray art with a nautical theme. Created by local children led by Seedhead Arts, as part of the Community Arts Partnership Hit the North Festival. Replaced longstanding "Welcome to Sailortown" graffiti.	Launched August 11, 2016
<i>The Flying Angel</i> <sup>72</sup>	Princes Dock Street, Mission to Seafarers	Bronze and stainless-steel sculpture of the Mission to Seafarers worldwide symbol, a protective angel calming the waves. Created by Maurice Harron; funded by the Mission to Seafarers and the Laganside Corporation.	2000

69 Laganside Corporation, "Annual Report – 1999–2000," 24; Laganside Corporation, "Laganside Public Art Guide, Art Trail 1."

70 Laganside Corporation, "Laganside Public Art Guide, Art Trail 1," 5.

71 "Community Arts Partnership and Seedhead Arts – Hit the North – Sailortown," *Community Arts Centre*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.capartscentre.com/2016/09/community-arts-partnership-and-seedhead-arts-hit-the-north-sailortown/>.

72 Jane Coyle, "The Art of the Possible," Laganside Corporation, *Turning the Tide for Belfast* (2007), 88; Laganside Corporation, "Laganside Public Art Guide, Art Trail 1."

Item	Location	Description	Date
St. Joseph's Church Hoarding	Princes Dock Street, St. Joseph's Church	Montage of historic photographs on vinyl, depicting Sailortown's vibrant past community life. Mounted on temporary hoarding outside the church to coincide with the Belfast Titanic Maritime Festival 2019 and moved inside the church when the hoarding was removed. Erected by Sailortown Regeneration.	Erected May 2020 and moved to the church interior November 2020.
Claire Hughes and Paula Strong Memorial	St. Joseph's Church, exterior	Plaque memorializing the death of two children in a car bombing on Ship Street on October 31, 1972.	Unidentified
Vinyl Cut-Outs – Graphic Design, Photos, Lyrics <sup>73</sup>	Princes Dock Street, Pat's Bar; Pilot Street, Rotterdam Bar and St. Joseph's Parochial House	Temporary vinyl cut-outs including photo imagery of past residents and Sailortown-related song lyrics. Installation on these unoccupied buildings was facilitated by arts organization Household as part of a wider Sailortown Regeneration Christmas project funded by Belfast City Council.	Erected December 2020
Dockers Club Commemorative Plaque	Pilot Street, Dockers Club	Dedicated to dockers killed at work or who suffered due to unsafe and unhealthy working conditions in the Port of Belfast. Erected by the Dockers Club and SHIP.	April 2007
Industrial and Maritime Heritage Wall Mural <sup>74</sup>	Pilot Street, Dockers Club	Computer designed montage of approx. sixty vintage images illustrating the industrial, maritime and social history of the area. Headed with the ITGWU emblem and images of five major trade union campaigners; surrounded by trade union emblems and tributes to dockers. Erected by the Shared Interpretive History Project (SHIP); supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. On the site of an earlier SHIP mural painted by Danny Devenny, depicting carters working on the dock (2006–13).	Unveiled January 30, 2015 by SIPTU and Unite the Union officials; detailed information panels unveiled June 16, 2017, by Unite the Union official

73 Terry McKeown, interview with A. Poulter, May 18, 2021.

74 SHIP, "Sharing More than a Century of North Belfast's Industrial and Maritime Heritage" (n.d.).

Item	Location	Description	Date
Labour Links Commemorative Plaque	Pilot Street, Dockers Club	Commemorates shared historical links between the American trade union movement, SHIP, and the James Connolly Visitor Centre.	Unveiled April 16, 2019, by Visiting American Delegation
Tall Ships Mural <sup>75</sup>	Barrow Square, Clarendon Dock	100 sq. m. mural depicting a tall ship at sea. Designed by 16-year-old Daniel Hamilton, winner of a Belfast Harbour public art competition and painted by Dan Devenny and Marty Lyons. These artists completed a mural of barrow boys unloading cargo at this same site in 1996, commissioned by the Laganside Corporation.	Painted to coincide with the Tall Ships return to Belfast, July 2015
<i>Dividers</i> <sup>76</sup>	Clarendon Dock, adjacent to Clarendon Building	Brass and stainless-steel sculpture with thematic link to the docks as dividers are instruments of navigation. Created by artist Vivien Burnside; funded by the Laganside Corporation, Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.	2002
ITGWU Offices, Commemorative Plaque <sup>77</sup>	120–22 Corporation Street, derelict site	Commemorates the ITGWU Belfast Branch office formerly on this site, Branch Secretaries including James Connolly and his association with deep-sea dockers. Erected by SHIP, Laborers International Union of North America (LiUNA) and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO).	Unveiled April 16, 2019 by relatives of James Flanagan and Winifred Carney, former Belfast Branch Secretaries.
<i>Wheels of Progress</i> <sup>78</sup>	Corporation Street, columns of the Cross-Harbour Lagan Bridge	Public art installation, vinyl graphics and steel. Vintage photos of Sailortown families enclosed in car mirror-shaped frames; stylized tickets, passport stamps and luggage labels. Designed by artist Peter Rooney; funded by the Laganside Corporation.	2004

75 "Belfast's Newest Piece of Public Art Is Complete," *Belfast Harbour*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://www.belfast-harbour.co.uk/news/belfasts-newest-piece-of-public-art-is-complete-89/>; "Recreating Days of Old by the Laganside," *Belfast Telegraph*, June 29, 1996.

76 Laganside Corporation, "Annual Report – 2001–02," 22; Laganside Corporation, "Laganside Public Art Guide, Art Trail 1."

77 SHIP, "Reclaiming Historical Memories: ITGWU Membership Ledgers from Over 100 Years Ago – Bringing People from All Walks of Life Together Today," (n.d.), 16.

78 Laganside Corporation, "Annual Report – 2004–05," 26; Jane Coyle, "The Art of the Possible," Laganside Corporation, *Turning the Tide for Belfast* (2007), 88.

Item	Location	Description	Date
"This was once Little Italy" <sup>79</sup>	24–42 Corporation Street, derelict site	Temporary installation on the site of the former social security office. A three-sided banner, reading "This was once Little Italy" and featuring images of Italian life and culture. Installation of this banner, designed by Deirdre McKenna, was facilitated by a local architect and Sailortown Regeneration.	Unveiled July 4, 2019; no longer <i>in situ</i> .
"Jobs that aren't there" graffiti <sup>80</sup>	24–42 Corporation Street, social security office	Graffiti stencils on the exterior of the social security office building. Read "Why do they keep sending me to look for jobs that aren't there?" and "5,000 jobs to be created, 125,000 people out of work."	Documented July 2013; destroyed with building demolition in 2017.

79 "New Sailortown Banner Honours Part of City That Will Be Forever 'Little Italy,'" *Belfast Telegraph*, July 5, 2019, 19.

80 "Jobs That Aren't There," and "This Was Once the Dole Office," *Extra Mural Activity*, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://extramuralactivity.com/2013/07/19/jobs-that-arent-there/>; <https://extramuralactivity.com/2019/11/08/this-was-once-the-dole-office/>.

### 3. Countering Post-industrial Capitalism in the Former Yugoslavia through Art

The Example of the Mural *Factories to the Workers*

Ognjen Kojanić

#### Abstract

The focus of this chapter is the mural painted in ITAS Prvomajska, a factory in north-west Croatia. I base my interpretation on interviews with its creators and the curators who commissioned it, as well as ethnographic research on worker ownership in ITAS. The mural is linked to the history of ITAS and, more broadly, to the socialist self-management legacy of Yugoslavia and the post-socialist trajectory of Croatia. I examine how the artist collective KURS avoids the pitfalls of what they see as aestheticization of the ITAS struggle. I also consider a potential limitation of the mural's effectiveness in the post-industrial present in cases when the audience lacks understanding of the context of the elements of the mural.

**Keywords:** mural; labour struggles; socialism; post-socialism; Croatia; Yugoslavia

#### Introduction

If you were visiting ITAS Prvomajska and only knew it as a metalwork factory, you would probably expect to see hulking machine tools, pallets with metal workpieces waiting for the next step in the production process, and workers in blue overalls coughing as a result of inhaling metal dust day in and day out. These are the typical trappings of an industrial shop floor. What you would likely not expect to see is a brightly coloured mural in the heart of the factory. The mural is one in a series of idiosyncrasies that make this factory different from most in Croatia. It is devoted to ITAS (Ivanec Machine Tool

Factory) workers' effort to save their workplace from the brink of demise that was the predicament of so many other manufacturing companies in Croatia. After years of struggle with the previous owner that culminated in a bankruptcy process, ITAS workers were legally recognized as owners of their enterprise in 2007.

The ITAS workers' story has attracted the attention of numerous activists, artists, journalists, and scholars, in Croatia and abroad, who have promoted it as a successful case of resistance to private ownership.<sup>1</sup> Over twenty-one months between 2015 and 2018, I conducted ethnographic research focusing on transnational political economic changes, legal and discursive shifts in Croatia and beyond, and material transformations within the company to understand how workers encountered limitations imposed by hegemonic practices in peripheral capitalism.<sup>2</sup> During this research, I became interested in the mural *Factories to the Workers*, and how it came to embody a type of artistic practice that aims to counter post-industrial capitalism in the former Yugoslavia. The mural was painted by the artist collective KURS, which was invited by BLOK, an independent curatorial collective from Zagreb.<sup>3</sup> The artist statement about their mural in ITAS highlighted the ongoing process of preserving worker ownership in the company, to which they wanted to contribute:

By painting a mural at ITAS Prvomajska factory in Ivanec, we primarily wanted to support the workers' organisation and struggle, which resists the logic of the market and the interests of gross capital. The aim has been to use our labour in order to join the workers' struggle and to contribute to its development and empowerment. The intervention contradicts today's view of mural painting as a tool of aestheticisation and decoration;

1 Vedrana Bibić, Andrea Milat, Srećko Horvat, and Igor Štiks, eds., *The Balkan Forum: Situations, Struggles, Strategies* (Zagreb: Bijeli val, 2014); Srđan Kovačević, *Factory to the Workers*, Documentary (Croatia: Fade In, 2021); Vedrana Pribačić, *The Factory Is Ours!*, Documentary (Manevar, Hrvatska Televizija [HTV], 2017); Miloš Vlaisavljević, "Yugoslav Self-Management and Hidden Cognitive Maps of Croatian Labour" (Master's thesis, Central European University, 2016).

2 Ognjen Kojanić, "Ownership vs. Property Rights in a Worker-Owned Company in Post-Socialist Croatia" (PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2020), <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/39290/>; Ognjen Kojanić, "'We're All Here for the Money': Solidarity and Divisions in a Worker-Owned Company," *Dialectical Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (June 2021): 151–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-020-09616-z>; Kojanić, Ognjen. "Micron Engagements, Macro Histories: Machines and the Agency of Labor in a Worker-Owned Company." *History and Anthropology*. Online first. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2172721>.

3 KURS comprises two artists, Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Radovanović.

it does not romanticise the struggle of ITAS' workers, but becomes its integral part.<sup>4</sup>

Most workers I spoke with during my ethnographic fieldwork in the company interpreted the mural as an expression of support. KURS signalled that support by opting to paint the mural within the factory—as opposed to on an external wall or elsewhere in the town. More broadly, the artists used the mural to articulate a critique of contemporary capitalism that has destroyed industries throughout the post-socialist region.

The work of the KURS collective exemplifies what the art theorist Uroš Čvoro calls “transitional aesthetics.” Such aesthetics “activate the lived experience of history as a site of political resistance by establishing relationships between critical gestures and imaginings of affirmative collectivities that mobilize the progressive legacies of socialism in Yugoslavia.”<sup>5</sup> In the dominant political discourse in post-Yugoslav countries, the historical experience of socialist Yugoslavia has been depicted as negative: the political system is seen as undemocratic and its economy as debt-funded and unsustainable. The legacies of Yugoslavia in the social sphere are being dismantled: people who harbour nostalgic memories are depicted as naïve and the monuments of anti-fascist struggle have been sidelined or outright removed from public space. Artists developing transitional aesthetics, according to Čvoro, are critical of such discreditation of Yugoslavia.

The work of the KURS collective spans murals, exhibition curation, research, and edited volumes on art history and contemporary practice.<sup>6</sup> Their stated hope for the mural in ITAS was to use art to reflect on workers' collectives as progressive models of management and forms of labour in industry. In their view, these models should not be limited to industrial sites alone, but rather, spill over into the field of cultural production. Cultural workers should not only reflect on these models, but also incorporate them by striving to embody them in their work, thus engaging in more equitable practices of art creation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, they view the mural as an intervention that

4 KURS, “Factories to the Workers!,” in *Urban Festival 13: Back to the Square: Art, Activism and Urban Research in Post-Socialism*, ed. Ivana Hanaček and Ana Kutleša, trans. Marina Miladinov (Zagreb: BLOK, 2016), 178–81, 179.

5 Uroš Čvoro, *Transitional Aesthetics: Contemporary Art at the Edge of Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 3.

6 For more information, see the website, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.udruzenjekurs.org/en/category/aktivnosti/>.

7 KURS, “Factories to the Workers!,” 179.

does not aestheticize the post-industrial condition, but rather, contributes to the struggle against the broader socio-political conditions that caused it.

Situating the artistic work of the KURS collective, the writer and scholar Igor Štiks examines it alongside other examples of “activist aesthetics” after the fall of socialism.<sup>8</sup> Building on the work of Hans-Thies Lehmann, Štiks develops the distinction between the aesthetics of resistance and the aesthetics of rebellion. He writes,

For Lehmann, the aesthetics of resistance implies “a memory of a possible future of the past.” In other words, the *aesthetics of resistance* is “a memory of a resistance” and of its hypothetical nature and possibilities. Lehmann contrasts the aesthetics of resistance with the *aesthetics of rebellion*, in which “art directly participates in a political movement.” Again, “in the aesthetics of resistance political consciousness reflects in an artistic way its doubts, its history, its potential failure, the unanswerable questions that would burden every political action,” whereas in the aesthetics of rebellion, art is at the same time in the service of a movement but also facilitates the articulation of political struggle.<sup>9</sup>

Štiks shows that the delineation between the aesthetics of resistance and the aesthetics of rebellion is not always clear. Rather, the former “always flirts” with the latter when “an aesthetics of resistance meets a concrete struggle and thus merges with an aesthetics of rebellion.”<sup>10</sup> The ITAS mural is one of the examples Štiks uses to make his point, concluding that “the self-management of workers, once the official ideology of Yugoslavia, becomes rebellion under capitalist conditions.”<sup>11</sup>

In this chapter, I examine how the artists contribute to a particular struggle, and thus, exemplify an aesthetics of rebellion. To understand the KURS collective’s mural and how it relates to their political goals, I develop an interpretation of the mural by drawing on interviews with its creators and the curators who commissioned it, as well as my ethnographic research on worker ownership in ITAS. The elements of the mural and its placement tie this piece of art to the history of ITAS as well as to the socialist self-management legacy of Yugoslavia and the post-industrial capitalist

8 Igor Štiks, “Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans,” *Third Text* 34, no. 4–5 (September 2, 2020): 461–79.

9 Štiks, “Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans,” 463 emphasizes in the original.

10 Štiks, “Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans,” 468.

11 Štiks, “Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans,” 473.



present of post-Yugoslav countries. I examine how KURS avoids the pitfalls of what they see as aestheticization or romanticization of the ITAS struggle. However, I also explore a potential limitation of the mural's effectiveness. In the post-industrial present, if the audience lacks understanding of the context of the elements of the mural, it may no longer be seen as an example of the aesthetics of rebellion.

### **Murals and Activist Art in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Context**

The KURS collective's murals connect the values of post-Second World War Yugoslavia to the struggles of contemporary progressive movements in Southeast Europe and elsewhere. For example, their mural *Solidarity – To the International Brigades* (2017) in Belgrade commemorates the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War on the eightieth anniversary of their founding. The themes they explore are anti-fascism, internationalism, industrialization, and the struggles of labour and other social movements. While these themes are deeply rooted in the history of socialist Yugoslavia, the medium of mural painting is not. As the KURS collective explained to me,

People expect that the [capital] city [of Belgrade] was covered in murals. But people don't think about what happened in art and culture [in Yugoslavia] after '48 when socialist realism was abandoned, that we don't have that legacy. [...] Nor do we have the tradition like Latin America, where muralist brigades were different, much more inclusive, much more engaged. [...] There is a preconception that, given our socialist legacy, murals were omnipresent in public space, but they weren't. At least in socialist Yugoslavia, they were never as used as in the Soviet Union. Maybe in the first years [after the Second World War] there were some, but those murals were incorporated in memorial complexes. They had a commemorative character. In Belgrade, that practice starts in the beginning of the 1980s; in fact, that is when the system was completely liberalized and turned in a different direction.<sup>12</sup>

The dominant forms of public art in Yugoslavia were monuments and memorial complexes that aimed to construct a collective memory. Within

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018. The interview was conducted in Serbian; all translations are my own.

this ideological project, particular attention was paid to the anti-fascist struggle and the heroic deeds of Yugoslav partisans in the Second World War. The primary intention was to forge ties among Yugoslavs of different national and ethnic origins under the slogan “Brotherhood and Unity.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the working class was affirmed as a collective subject in the revolutionary labour movement, and the Yugoslav model of self-management was celebrated.<sup>14</sup> The official title of this corpus of public art, coined by a Croatian Parliament committee in the 1980s, was “Monuments to the Revolutionary Labour Movement, the National Liberation War, and the Socialist Revolution.”<sup>15</sup> Because the Yugoslav state did not prescribe specific styles such as socialist realism, artists could adopt the principles of modernist art that were dominant beyond the Eastern bloc art system. While not prescriptive, however, the representatives of the state limited freedom of expression so that artists would not expose problems by engaging with controversial topics, such as rising unemployment.<sup>16</sup> To avoid causing a stir, Yugoslav artists innovated by adopting abstract and neo-avant-garde forms of expression; these tendencies were sometimes described as “modernist aestheticism.” Instead of causing controversy, they went hand in hand with the ideological project of collective memory formation that embraced the universalism of the dominant ideology.<sup>17</sup>

13 See, for example, Robert Burghardt and Gal Kirn, “Yugoslav Partisan Memorials: The Aesthetic Form of the Revolution as a Form of Unfinished Modernism?,” in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Zagreb: UHA/CCA, 2012), 84–95; Marija Jauković, “To Share or to Keep: The Afterlife of Yugoslavia’s Heritage and the Contemporary Heritage Management Practices,” *Politička misao: Časopis za politologiju* 51, no. 5 (2014): 80–104.

14 Sanja Horvatinčić, “Monuments Dedicated to Labor and the Labor Movement in Socialist Yugoslavia,” *Etnološka tribina: Godišnjak Hrvatskog etnološkog društva* 44, no. 37 (December 15, 2014): 169–86.

15 Horvatinčić, “Monuments Dedicated to Labor,” 175.

16 Susan Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia, 1945–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). Although various forms of critique by artists started proliferating, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, on the fringes of official cultural production see, for example, Gal Kirn, Dubravka Sekulić, and Žiga Testen, eds., *Surfing the Black: Yugoslav Black Wave Cinema and Its Transgressive Moments* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2013); Miško Šuvaković, “Art as a Political Machine: Fragments on the Late Socialist and Postsocialist Art of Mitteleuropa and the Balkans,” in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Aleš Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 90–134; Aleš Erjavec, “Neue Slowenische Kunst—New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management, and the 1980s,” in Erjavec, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, 135–74.

17 Burghardt and Kirn, “Yugoslav Partisan Memorials.” In other contexts, murals played an important role in state-sanctioned ideological projects, see Mary Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art*

For KURS, the fact that Yugoslavia did not have a strong tradition of mural painting was in some sense liberating, as it allowed the collective to draw from a wide range of stylistic influences.

What we do is distinct because we have a measure of—not sure how to call it, it's not socialist aesthetics. Some elements, yes, resemble the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde and Russian socialist posters. On the other hand, they resemble the aesthetics of Latin America and their murals. [...] The themes are either markedly antifascist or in a way related to social struggles. So that may be a specific combination. Additionally, there is a measure of a more modern visual presentation that incorporates elements of street art.<sup>18</sup>

The KURS collective's choice of the mural form is based on the artists' interest in producing art in public spaces, which invites the engagement of a broad public.<sup>19</sup> The intent behind their murals is always political, and the message is crafted from a leftist perspective, which is explicitly against the hegemonic politics in post-Yugoslav space.

### Workers in Production and Workers in Struggle

The ITAS mural's clean lines and bold colours stand out against a largely drab industrial surrounding. For that reason, it is prominently featured in documentary films and visual materials accompanying reporting about the company.<sup>20</sup> The mural depicts workers—defined by production and struggle as two main activities—and important dates in the recent history of ITAS. On the left side, six employees are working. In the top left corner, one woman is using a screwdriver and another a wrench. To their right, another woman is using a hand-held drill and

*Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

18 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.

19 The collective did not limit its work to mural painting at the time of my research. It was also engaged in the production of the Wall Newspapers (*Zidne novine*), distributed in cities in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, with the goal of considering various social issues from a leftist perspective. Compared to murals, the Wall Newspapers allowed easier dissemination in public space because they did not require bureaucratic permissions and cost less to produce. Typically, the KURS collective sent them to libraries, galleries, and other institutions that could either post the Newspapers on bulletin boards or allow their visitors to take a copy.

20 Kovačević, *Factory to the Workers*; Pribačić, *The Factory Is Ours!*



Figure 3.1: *Factories to the Workers* mural. Photo: The author, 2018.

further right, a woman and a man are working on a computer. Below them, a man is operating one of the most common machines at ITAS, a Prvomajska Heckert GKA 3 V milling machine. On the right side, workers are protesting. Four men and three women are clearly depicted in the front, while more silhouettes are visible behind them. Five of the workers are holding their fists in the air and one male worker is blowing a whistle. One woman is holding a hammer in her left hand. Symbolically, the dominant blue colour of the clothes that many figures wear is tied to their work in manufacturing and their raised fists are a sign of protest and resistance.

Bridging the two sides of the mural is a blue field with stark white letters in all caps declaring “Tvornice radnicima” (Factories to the Workers). Below it is an image of a worker holding a flag in his right hand and a wrench in his left. On the very bottom of the mural is a banner with four important dates: June 23, 2005, “The Razing of the Wall”; July 9, 2005, “The Occupation of the Factory”; November 7, 2005, “The Hunger Strike”; and January 1, 2007, “The Beginning of Operations for ITAS Prvomajska.”

The very placement of the mural within the factory spatially connects it to the broader context of everyday labour that takes place around it. As the artists from the KURS collective explain, it was very important for them to paint the mural among the workers:

It was really important that we actually worked, we were actually inhabiting the same space that they did. We literally inhaled the same dust, had the same working conditions. At first, it wasn't clear to them if we were just there to do a job, *šljakeri* (hired hands), or if we were some sorts of artists. It was simply not clear to them why some artists climbed a scaffold and endured everything they were enduring. So it was good because that way we could get closer to them. We drank the same coffee from the vending machine, ate the same lunch. Those things meant something to them and that's why it's good that we did it inside.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, a set of practices during the time it took to paint the mural allowed the artists to overcome their status as outsiders to the company. The food and drinks the artists consumed with the workers, even the dust they inhaled, established a tangible connection among all parties. Even though these elements are not visually represented in the mural, its placement belongs to the same context, and thus, points to them. Furthermore, the fact that the artists are from Serbia, painting in a Croatian factory years after the nationalist war that resulted in the break-up of Yugoslavia, brings to mind "Brotherhood and Unity" as one of the most important values in socialist Yugoslavia.

The artists did not limit their references to ITAS. When they first came to ITAS and started sketching the mural, the central section included the phrase "Tvornica se brani iznutra" (The Factory Is Defended from Within). This slogan pointed to the necessity of fighting the management's attempt to sow disunity and conveyed how the resulting trials and tribulations allowed the workers to forge solidarity in opposition to the management. The ITAS workers' leader, who was frequently invited to talk in media appearances and public roundtables, used this pithy slogan to summarize the experience of the workers' struggle for ownership. Ultimately, the KURS collective artists decided that this slogan was too defensive.

They eventually replaced it with the phrase "Tvornice radnicima" (Factories to the Workers), which was a common slogan in Yugoslavia and other twentieth-century socialist countries. After the Second World War, Yugoslav communists implemented the system of self-management through a series of constitutional and legislative changes. In an important speech on workers' control of enterprises, Josip Broz Tito, the Yugoslav leader, declared, "The mottoes 'the factories for the workers' and 'the land for the peasants' are not abstract, propaganda slogans, but mottoes which have deep meaning. They

21 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.

contain the entire program of socialist relations in production, in regard to social ownership, in regard to the rights and duties of working people.”<sup>22</sup>

ITAS began operating in 1960, under the system of self-management. In recent years, it has been touted as one of the rare, if not the only, successful case of worker shareholding in Southeast Europe. By choosing to replace the phrase “The Factory Is Defended from Within” with the phrase “Factories to the Workers,” the artists aligned the ITAS case with the history of aspirations for workers’ control over the means of production in socialism. Connecting the ITAS case with the history of self-management in Yugoslavia points to its importance beyond the local context.

The artists were satisfied that replacing the phrase used in reference to ITAS itself was not seen by workers as erasing their particular struggle. “At the end, when [we included] that banner with the dates, they felt that it really was their own, and that they still have to struggle. So I think it was okay that we changed it.”<sup>23</sup> The first three dates summarize the struggle of the ITAS workers with the shareholders who controlled the majority of shares in the company before the takeover. The first big confrontation took place when the management built a wall to separate the two production halls. The workers interpreted this as an attempt by the management to divide them spatially, in addition to sowing divisions among the workers. Accordingly, they razed it on June 23, 2005. When the management attempted to rebuild the wall, workers occupied the factory, on July 9, 2005. Finally, workers began a hunger strike on November 7, 2005, in response to the electricity supply being shut off. The hunger strike was the most dramatic event in the prolonged struggle with the management and it was referenced by workers whenever they talked about the hardships they endured while trying to save their company. After a series of legal manoeuvres, workers’ ownership of the company was recognized and they began production in the newly created legal entity named ITAS Prvomajska, on January 1, 2007.

The inclusion of these important dates in the history of ITAS on the banner echoes a common practice in Yugoslavia’s memory politics. As explained above, Yugoslav communists built a culture of memory in which the partisan struggle in the Second World War had a prominent place. For example, every town commemorated the date of its liberation from fascist occupation. Sometimes, those dates were used to name or rename important

22 Josip Broz Tito, “Workers Manage Factories in Yugoslavia,” trans. unknown, Belgrade, June 26, 1950, accessed February 18, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tito/1950/06/26.htm>.

23 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.

companies, such as, “May Third Shipyard” in Rijeka. ITAS was a part of the company Prvomajska (derived from May 1, International Labour Day), the name given to the company when it was nationalized after the Second World War. When the workers restarted production after their takeover of ITAS, they added Prvomajska to its name and registered it as a new corporate entity—ITAS Prvomajska.

Finally, the figure in the centre is another evocation of Yugoslav legacy. It resembles Antun Augustinčić’s famous sculpture in Gornja Stubica (fifty kilometres south of Ivanec) that represents Matija Gubec, a sixteenth-century serf who led a peasant rebellion in parts of what are now Croatia and Slovenia. This historical event was brought up in socialist Yugoslavia as “an apt metaphor for the values of liberty, brotherhood and unity.”<sup>24</sup>

As soon as KURS drew this figure, ITAS workers told the artists that they recognized its resemblance to the sculpture of Gubec. The figure, however, is not a replica of the sculpture, but rather, combines its bodily posture with elements such as the figure holding a wrench in one hand and a red flag in the other. These details distance the mural from peasants’ struggles and relate it to contemporary leftist movements and workers’ struggles. Initially, the artists had intended to show the leader of the ITAS workers in the struggle against the previous owner. However, as their design and plans progressed, the artists decided to avoid singling him out as the protagonist. Instead, they chose to collectivize the struggle by visually referencing a well-known representation. As Gubec stands for all peasant rebels from Zagorje, so does the figure with the wrench and the flag stand for all ITAS workers. He also represents other workers beyond ITAS who are struggling to save their livelihoods from the political and economic processes that have resulted in de-industrialization.

On another level, the figure functions as a meta picture: a picture within a picture reflecting on the nature of pictures.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the formal choices, such as the style and colour that place the mural in a particular artistic lineage that can be broadly understood as left-leaning art, the visual representation of the Gubec sculpture is a figural reference to art in socialist Yugoslavia. The goal of this meta picture is to reflect on the way contemporary artists approach the legacy of Yugoslav art, or rather, how

24 Tomislav Oroz and Nevena Škrbić Alempijević, “Two Faces of the Monument: Politics and Practices in the Usages of the Monument to the Peasant Revolt and Matija Gubec in Gornja Stubica (Translation),” *Studia ethnologica Croatica* 27, no. 1 (December 15, 2015): 157–87, 163.

25 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 19.

that legacy is largely forgotten and marginalized. By representing Gubec's sculpture within the mural, the KURS collective references Yugoslav public art, promoting solidarity and collective struggle. Simultaneously, it is both a nostalgic reference to the past and an unmistakable comment on the contemporary post-Yugoslavia. Alongside their everyday work, the remnants of the industrial workforce must engage in political struggle to protect their jobs from the vagaries of the capitalist market and unfavourable state policies.

To sum up, understanding the mural's placement in the factory, its slogans, dates, and the central figure's resemblance to the Gubec sculpture requires knowledge of the context in which the mural was created, as well as the history of Yugoslavia. Bringing to bear the knowledge of the context fosters an interpretation of the mural as more than purely decorative. Instead, it creates the conditions for the mural to become an integral part of the workers' struggle not just in ITAS, but also elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the mural can be seen as an example of the aesthetics of rebellion.<sup>27</sup>

### Limitations of Furthering a Leftist Politics through Art

KURS approached the painting of the *Factories to the Workers* mural by considering ITAS workers as their primary audience. While the initial idea had been to paint the mural on a public surface in Ivanec, the artists eventually opted to paint it inside the factory. They told me they had wanted "the mural to address the workers who are there daily and still need support. [...] If we'd done it outside," they explained, "we wouldn't have communicated with them. We wouldn't have been able to talk to them, a worker wouldn't have been able to say that this machine in particular was very important, which we then drew and integrated in the mural, things like that."<sup>28</sup>

The artists modified their sketch to include a specific milling machine, the type that the workers had told them was the most numerous in the factory. Those machines had been produced by Prvomajska, the company that ITAS had belonged to in the socialist period, when ITAS was at its peak. The workers were also spending time around the artists, and they were able to catch a mistake in one of the dates included on the banner.

26 KURS, "Factories to the Workers!," 179.

27 Štiks, "Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans."

28 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.



At the end, when we were writing the dates [...] it was great because workers gathered around us and observed us. And some of them recalled, if there were young guys with them, “You were still in high school when I went on a hunger strike.” And that was great actually, they totally identified with it. There were a couple of metres of the banner left, and one of them said at the end, “Great, there’s room for more struggle.” So that was wonderful for us, they recognized it as something that was created to support them.<sup>29</sup>

To the artists, this statement demonstrated that ITAS workers felt a connection to the mural.<sup>30</sup> They seemed appreciative of the artists’ effort and found the image visually pleasing at the time of my fieldwork. However, years after the mural had been painted, it never appeared as more than a backdrop to their everyday activities and did not inspire them to reflect on worker ownership. To understand this, it is helpful to consider the position of ITAS in the highly competitive international market for machine-tool production. The workers were preoccupied with their company’s problems, primarily their perennially late salaries.<sup>31</sup> By 2018, the successful takeover of the company ten years earlier had receded as attention focused on the exigencies of survival. While a handful of people continued to be invested in the idea of creating a model of worker ownership, most workers saw their jobs in ITAS as just that—jobs. The fact that ITAS workers were recognized as majority shareholders in their company could not trump the dominant perception that, in practice, worker ownership did not empower workers if their company’s survival continued to be uncertain. This, ultimately, problematizes the goal of the mural’s creators to expand workers’ struggle beyond the confines of this company.

As mentioned, the mural circulates widely in documentary films, photos, and videos reporting from the factory. In the process of circulation, the mural attracted audiences well beyond the factory and the town of Ivanec. The artists wanted to inspire political thought and action that would deepen and extend workers’ struggles in ITAS and beyond. But if the mural failed to do so among most workers familiar with the story of ITAS’s struggle, what could it achieve beyond this factory? Put differently, what happens with the interpretation of the ITAS mural by audiences that lack knowledge of the context of ITAS workers’ struggle?

29 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.

30 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.

31 Kojanić, “We’re All Here for the Money,” 2021.

The problem raised here is related to the broader socio-cultural context of de-industrialization in contemporary Croatia. Croatia's economic policy has moved away from manufacturing to promoting the service sector, especially tourism. The percentage of workers employed in the manufacturing sector has been dropping steadily for decades since it peaked in the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> By 2018, it hovered around 17 per cent.<sup>33</sup> The share of manufacturing in the GDP has also been dropping; in 2018, it was around 12.5 per cent compared to 14.5 per cent in the EU, and well below the same indicator in nearby countries such as Slovenia and the Czech Republic.<sup>34</sup>

In the decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, different Croatian governments have worked to transform the country from a self-management to a capitalist system conforming to the rules of the European Union and other international economic bodies. The process had already started in the late 1980s, when Yugoslav leadership began taking steps to significantly liberalize the economy. After the break-up of the country in the early 1990s, there was a series of constitutional and legislative changes through which social property was first nationalized and then privatized. Simultaneously, the Croatian economy was shrinking due to the wartime efforts and human casualties, and the fact that companies were cut off from the formerly internal Yugoslav market, operating in the context of high inflation. Post-war economic policy that was guided by the International Monetary Fund stabilized the economy, but it crushed many local manufacturing companies.<sup>35</sup> In the first decade of Croatian independence, the number of employees in industry decreased by 25.7 per cent.<sup>36</sup> The official rate of unemployment reached 19.6 per cent in 1999. If those employed but not receiving wages are included, the rate of unemployment was 29.4 per cent, a figure forcing approximately a quarter of the labour force into the informal economy.<sup>37</sup>

32 Krešimir Peračković, "Hrvatska u postindustrijsko doba: Promjene u strukturi rodno aktivnoga stanovništva po sektorima djelatnosti i spolu," *Društvena istraživanja: časopis za opća društvena pitanja* 20, no. 1 (111) (March 17, 2011): 89–110.

33 Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje, *Godišnjak 2018* (Zagreb: Hrvatski zavod za zapošljavanje, 2019), accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.hzz.hr/content/stats/Godisnjak-2018-HZZ.pdf>.

34 World Bank, "Manufacturing, Value Added (% of GDP) – European Union, Croatia | Data," accessed July 9, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.IND.MANF.ZS?locations=EU-HR>.

35 Domagoj Mihaljević, "The Political Framework of Industrial Meltdown in Croatia, 1990–2013," *METU Studies in Development* 41, no. 3 (December 26, 2014): 349–70.

36 Marina Kokanović, "Croatian Labour Realities, 1990–1999," *SEER – South-East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, no. 3 (1999): 185–208, 193.

37 Marina Kokanović, "The Cost of Nationalism: Croatian Labor, 1990–1999," in *Workers after Workers' States: Labor and Politics in Postcommunist Eastern Europe*, ed. Stephen Crowley and David Ost (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 141–57, 143.

While the overall economic conditions in the country have improved since then, many blue-collar workers have been left behind.<sup>38</sup>

These socio-economic processes were not ignored in Croatian visual art. Artists have critiqued their consequences visible in the widespread suffering of workers. For example, Rafaela Dražić's 2013 intervention entitled *Ship=City* reflected on the role that the Bank of Rijeka—the first community bank in Croatia, now part of the Austrian Erste Group in Croatia—used to play in maintaining the “May Third Shipyard” and other local industrial sites in the socialist period, which banks in contemporary Croatia no longer do.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Iva Marčetić tracked the deleterious effects of privatization in Zagreb within her 2012 project *Mapping Alienated Cities/Work*. Most of the companies mapped by Marčetić were a shadow of their former selves: some were liquidated following privatization, others were in bankruptcy proceedings, while some were producing less than they had in the socialist period.<sup>40</sup>

Workers' struggles in the past three decades have been relatively widespread in Croatia, but they have failed to inspire solidarity in the broader public. Despite marginal interventions by artists and intellectuals, the working class has largely been removed from the dominant discourse, which left many workers feeling isolated.<sup>41</sup> Instead, mainstream discussions of social issues are marked by neoliberalism and political ones by nationalism.<sup>42</sup> The workers fighting to save manufacturing companies that are struggling to survive in the market and seen as only surviving thanks to state subsidies are often described as scroungers (*uhljebi*) who are holding on to unproductive and useless jobs. The fact that the plight of many blue-collar workers is often negatively depicted in the national media has implications for how broader audiences approach the ITAS mural and similar artworks.

38 See for example, Chiara Bonfiglioli, *Women and Industry in the Balkans: The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Textile Sector* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019); Andrew Hodges, “Psychic Landscapes, Worker Organizing and Blame: Uljanik and the 2018 Croatian Shipbuilding Crisis,” *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society* 67, no. 1 (2019): 50–74; Sanja Potkonjak and Tea Škokić, “In the World of Iron and Steel: On the Ethnography of Work, Unemployment and Hope,” *Narodna Umjetnost: Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research* 50, no. 1 (July 10, 2013): 74–95.

39 Ana Kovačić, Sanja Sekelj, and Lea Vene, “Znam neke osnovne stvari: O procesima privatizacije u Hrvatskoj kroz umjetničke projekte i javne akcije,” *Život umjetnosti: Časopis o modernoj i suvremenoj umjetnosti i arhitekturi* 94, no. 1 (July 1, 2014): 120–27, 124.

40 Kovačić, Sekelj, and Vene, “Znam neke osnovne stvari,” 125.

41 Dražen Cepić, *Class Cultures in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2018), 110.

42 Marko Grdešić, “Class Discourse in Croatia: Where Did It Go? Is It Coming Back?,” *East European Politics and Societies* 29, no. 3 (August 1, 2015): 663–71.

Furthermore, transformations of the politico-economic context in Croatia have come hand in hand with transformations in the domain of public art. As Čvoro describes, socialism has largely been revised or erased as Yugoslav history has been nationalized and many Second World War monuments in Croatia were removed or destroyed in the 1990s.<sup>43</sup> Observing the relationship of the public to the remaining monuments reveals how the history of Yugoslavia “was usurped, manipulated and erased in the 1990s, and ways in which these events are once again being rewritten in the present.”<sup>44</sup>

There have been admirable attempts to orient contemporary audiences towards this heritage in a way that opposes nationalist master-narratives.<sup>45</sup> Some artists have opposed the sidelining of Yugoslavia’s public art by creating new art that engages directly with the remaining monuments. Examples of such artworks include *Bandaging the Wounded/The Howling of the Wounded* by Siniša Labrović, performed in Sinj in 2000, and Igor Grubić’s placement of red scarves on monuments to partisan heroes in Zagreb in his 2006 performance *Scarves and Monuments*.<sup>46</sup> By centring their performance pieces on the monuments themselves, these artists aim to show the continued relevance of the monuments in response to their marginalization or even destruction. As the political theorist Gal Kirn notes, such initiatives invite novel academic, artistic, or political interpretations of Yugoslav art that could use the memory of the Yugoslav revolution to imagine futures where the value of anti-fascism and the potential for deep social transformation can be foundational. However, he questions the effectiveness of such initiatives without a strong political organization to support them.<sup>47</sup>

This is the broader socio-political and economic context for the KURS collective’s work. They explained why their work is never purely aesthetic, referencing the substantial amount of research they conducted before painting each of their murals to ground them in the legacy of leftist art in Yugoslavia.<sup>48</sup> Among other topics, they conducted research on the development of art and culture during the anti-fascist struggle of the partisans in

43 Čvoro, *Transitional Aesthetics*, 108, 114.

44 Čvoro, *Transitional Aesthetics*, 109.

45 See for example, Sanja Horvatinčić, “Heritage from Below,” in *Micropolitics 2018: Heritage from Below*, ed. Sanja Horvatinčić (Zagreb: BLOK, 2018), 8–15.

46 Potkonjak and Pletenac, “‘Kada spomenici ožive—‘umjetnost sjećanja’ u javnom prostoru”; Štiks, “Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans,” 467.

47 Gal Kirn, “Transnationalism in Reverse: From Yugoslav to Post-Yugoslav Memorial Sites,” in *Transnational Memory*, ed. Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 313–38.

48 Except Ivanec, KURS collective has painted murals that include motifs of international solidarity and other Yugoslav values in Belgrade, Bitola, Graz, Maribor, and Ramallah.

the Second World War, also known as the People's Liberation War (PLW).<sup>49</sup> They told me that they wished there was a strong political party to provide a way for individuals and groups to act politically and react to social problems in a unified way. In their research, they observed the potential of culture to contribute to political action during the PLW in Yugoslavia.

Workers in culture can contribute to the strengthening of movements, and their growth and development. But that wouldn't have happened, and neither would have the mass cultural production during the PLW, if there hadn't been a communist party that tried to gather [...] all those developments and initiatives. That's on the one hand. And on the other hand, the movement itself wouldn't have developed as much if the artists hadn't contributed their work and furthered various goals defined by the movement. [...] [C]ulture can't reach its potential without the movement, and the movement can't develop without thinking about the potential that culture has.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, art and leftist politics can be complementary, one reinforcing the other's effects in society. Without that mutual relationship, politically motivated art has limited broad public reach. In the context of de-industrializing Croatia, where negative views of blue-collar workers abound and the legacy of socialist public art is being marginalized, many audiences may limit their interpretation of the interventions of the KURS collective to their aesthetic function.

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49 Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Radovanović, eds., *Lekcije o odbrani: Prilozi za analizu kulturne delatnosti NOP-a* (Beograd: KURS i Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2016); Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Radovanović, eds., *Lekcije o odbrani: Da li je moguće stvarati umetnost revolucionarno?* (Beograd: KURS i Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2017).

50 Interview with the KURS collective, Belgrade, April 23, 2018.

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## About the Author

**Ognjen Kojanić** received his PhD in cultural anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. He is currently a lecturer at the University of Freiburg. Previously, he held a Humboldt Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the University of Cologne. His primary research interests lie within the fields of political economy and political ecology with a geographic focus on Eastern Europe. He has published articles dealing with labour, property relations, and class politics; infrastructure and human-environment relations; and the anthropology of European peripheries.



# Section Two

The Body in Industrial Space as a Stage  
for Cultural Reintegration



## 4. A Discursive Site of Memory for Industry

Landschaftspark, North Duisburg

*Frances Guerin*

### Abstract

In the 1990s, the coal and steel mine complex at Meiderich, Duisburg in Germany's Ruhr Valley was regenerated into an ecologically sustainable Landscape Park. In this chapter, I argue that the Landscape Park offers a study in the potential role of art for the creation of an integrative, inclusive social experience of the past for those who were oppressed by that same past, are dislocated in the present, and are otherwise erased from future visions of the region. Through artworks made from the materials of industry, the site creates continuity and dialogue between aesthetics and industry, work, and creativity, as well as the past and present. It also invites sociological integration across generations, between former workers and their families, visitors to and from the region.

**Keywords:** industrial art; corporeal memory; rewilding; de-monumentalization; Ruhr Valley

In the 1990s, the monumental coal and steel mine complex at Meiderich, North Duisburg in Germany's Ruhr Valley, was regenerated into an ecologically sustainable landscaped park, known as the Landschaftspark. In this chapter, I consider the regenerated park against the background of ongoing challenges to provide social, environmental, and economic solutions for future sustainability across Europe's once thriving industrial regions. I argue that the fusion of art and industry in the Landschaftspark generates living memories at the site. It offers visitors from outside the region an opportunity to discover the history of nineteenth-century industry

from multiple perspectives. Simultaneously, it creates opportunities for the participation and integration of locals. At the Landschaftspark, the behemoths of nineteenth-century industry, the mine and mill structures as sublime cathedrals of modernity, are transformed into artworks in an ecologically sustainable landscape. In turn, these artworks can be discovered by visitors who engage them to “rearticulate” the industrial past, and the post-industrial present and future in ever-developing narratives. Andreas Huyssen argues in his discussions on the post-1989 rebuilding of Berlin that the privileging of monumentality as a nineteenth-century affirmation of the nation-state and the “cultural needs of the bourgeoisie” must be historicized as such if we are to break free of their allure. The iconic value of architectural monuments must be narrativized rather than visually deified within their physical contexts. The Landschaftspark realizes such a historicization by placing the iconic monuments of industry at the centre of a participatory culture that de-monumentalizes the industrial past.<sup>1</sup> While we may want to question the equation between monumental urban architecture and industrial behemoths, central to the project of regeneration in the Ruhr Valley has been the resistance to annexing the bourgeois power and ideology transmitted by structures such as the one-time mills and mines of North Duisburg. Emphasis has been placed on the creative possibilities for the visitor’s address of the historical through the rewilding of the former industrial land. Thus, the multiple narratives of diverse visitors can be explored thanks to new elements of landscape design that are integrated into a restored biodiverse, green ecosystem. Memories, stories, and histories emerge as visitors wander through the site, rather than being imparted through monuments or monoliths.

The Landschaftspark is an emerging natural environment, but it also functions as a repository when the objects and structures of industry are collected, preserved, and made available for public leisure activities. As I demonstrate, through the public’s experience of objects and structures, the remnants of the past assume the status of “counterweights” to dominant historical narratives.<sup>2</sup> Like documents, records, objects, and photographs that trigger and create memory, the artefacts and structures

1 Research for this chapter was generously funded by a Research Fellowship from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst/German Academic Exchange Service in 2015.

Andreas Huyssen, “Monumental Seduction: Christo in Berlin,” in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3–48.

2 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 26.

of industry also furnish visual evidence of what took place in the past. In turn, through the experiences and stories that emerge via physical movement and the discovery of these objects and sites, visitors form sensate memory narratives across space and time. Within these so-called memory narratives, the past is potentially read “against the grain,” raising the marginalized voices associated with these locations. The resultant possibility of unpredictable narratives generated through the movement of locals, former workers, international visitors, the socially marginalized, potentially forge a type of anti-museum, or better, as Huyssen would have it, “anti-heritage” narratives.<sup>3</sup> Through examination of visitors’ encounters with artworks fashioned from the materials and in the grounds of the former ironworks, I demonstrate in this chapter that visitors can create their own narratives questioning those of oppression that motivated and resulted from the one-time powerful industrial mechanisms at the Meiderich site.

My claim for the discursive power of physical movement to “de-monumentalize” is taken from Michel de Certeau’s description of the practice of walking through the city on a journey of discovery as a form of resistance. For de Certeau, walkers elude the rationalization and control that are imposed by the organizers and administrators of, in this case, systems of industrial and economic production. Walking and discovering are practices in which memory is ignited by details, objects to be touched, minutiae that cannot be seen from above, only at the city’s ground level. Thus, as walkers explore the Landschaftspark, memories are prompted by discoveries leading to associations with the industrial past. Even those who have no previous relationship with the site are able to imagine the industrial past, potentially for the first time. Following de Certeau, at ground level in the Landschaftspark, the presence of objects and structures of industry as remnants of the past transformed into artworks lead toward experiences that do not simply reveal the ghosts of the past. They invite formation of new and diverse memories. Moreover, I extend de Certeau’s thinking to argue for the potential to create inclusive community at these locations. This is done particularly through organized activities and tours in which oral narratives formed around repurposed objects and structures are discovered and passed on while walking.<sup>4</sup>

3 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Making Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

4 Michel De Certeau, “Walking the City,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 102–19.

## The Park as Public Artwork

Before turning to criticisms of the landscaping and revitalization of the park, it is instructive to consider the Landschaftspark as itself a public artwork recreating connections to the industrial past. In contradistinction to classical public monuments that invite looking at, the ghosts of the past in the park require physical and sensuous experiences through immersion. The body and, particularly, the five senses become the scribes of individualized memory narratives. Moreover, like the opportunity to experience industry differently at individual artworks such as *Piazza Metallica* and *Fern Spiral* discussed below, these narratives potentially resist both the discourses of power that once fuelled the mines and mills, and those that oversee the site today. The walker becomes immersed in sensate experiences that are not just personal, or intimate, but are also fleeting. If we follow de Certeau's logic, the mobile visitor is perpetually rewriting the space, dismantling its hierarchies, and disavowing its "historical justifications" and proper names.<sup>5</sup>

As visitors walk around and climb over refuse-strewn paths inside the blast furnaces, they sense the crunch underfoot of mortar and other decaying matter. The power generator produces an echo, and our bodies are isolated within the cold, wet air tunnels of the underground levels on a winter day. There is dust everywhere on a summer's day, and the surfaces of industrial structures become hot to touch. A relatively quiet soundscape becomes a composite of lower-decibel murmurs, soft echoes, and whispers of unseen activities such as pigeons flurrying, mice scuttling across refuse, and insects buzzing. In addition, the environment makes its own sounds: water drips, winds blow, machinery and doors creak in response. Inside the buildings, there are variant smells: damp woodwork, the residue of chemicals, and the surprising bouquet of wildflowers that have begun to grow. All around are the visible signs of the past: notices and signage are stuck to the walls, graffiti scribbled on them, the odd helmet hung on a hook, a lost glove, or other forgotten artefacts in hidden corners.

As we move freely, without rules or direction in these spaces that were once highly organized and ordained, many visitors to the park have the opportunity to imagine a past in which all behaviour was mechanized, surveyed, and curtailed. In addition to the movements and contortions of the body as we discover the vestiges of industry transformed into

5 De Certeau, "Walking the City," 114.

artworks, together with the traces of the working day—notes, tools, clothes—scattered over floors and walls, our wanderings become filled with sensations, reflections, memories. We engage in a pleasurable negotiation of spaces, recognizing experiences and sensations that were denied to those who once worked there. A one-time world of social, physical, temporal restrictions becomes labyrinthine and filled with pleasurable discovery in the present.

Tim Edensor describes this experience in his discussion of exploring industrial ruins in England:

This kind of remembering implies an ethics about confronting and understanding otherness (here, the alterity of the past) which is tactile, imaginative, and involuntary. It cannot be imperialistic because it must be aware of its own contingent sense-making capacities, and, allowing external interruption and sensory invasion, is porous and refuses fixity.<sup>6</sup>

In the Landschaftspark, corporeal memories emerge as we wander. In addition, these ruins are always under the promise of erasure, their return to nature imminent. Like memory and the experiences of remembering through physical engagement, the ruins are in a condition of perpetual change. The fluidity of this empathic and sensual apprehension ensures the ruins and our experience of them are “contingent,” escaping ossification through looking. The site itself resists the monumentalization that power erects to remember itself and to exploit for economic profit.

In this anti-museum of the park, “disruptive ghosts” wander freely through the landscape avoiding ossification, confinement, and, at worst, exorcism.<sup>7</sup> These irruptions are the basis of memories at de-centralized sites that rail against strategies of surveillance and preservation that pervade the conservative discourses of heritage studies.<sup>8</sup> The buildings may be monumentalized, but the experiences of them and their environs are anything but. Experiences are governed by transgression, refusal, and the memories that live and grow in temporal transformation of industry into art, and the consequent ongoing transformations of space.

6 Tim Edensor, “The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 6 (2005): 829–49, 847.

7 Edensor, “The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins.”

8 Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 154–56.

## De-monumentalizing through Time and Space

While those who worked at the mines will no doubt have different experiences from those who did not, visitors from outside the region are still likely to experience multiple and varied histories available at the site. Daytime tours and night-time cultural and educative events, and temporary exhibitions detail the multiple histories of the complex. While visitors spend time marvelling at the sublime buildings, as explained above, contemplation is only the beginning of the experience. On a more theoretical level, the peripheral location of the former industrial complex both underlines the ever-changing nature of the park in its transition back to a pre-industrial state, and the conscious effort that must be made by visitors.

Meiderich is ten kilometres north of Duisburg's main train station. The Landschaftspark is forty minutes by public transport from the train station, followed by a short walk from Meiderich. Getting to the Landschaftspark can be time consuming without a car. Similarly, the isolated location means that visitors must make the journey specifically to visit the complex and park. The peripheral location is indeed common to European industrial sites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Placed on the margins of larger cities, the Thyssen steelworks, their attendant administration, housing, education, and other community service buildings form the contours and character of what filmmaker and political activist, Alexander Kluge describes as commuter cities. Today, such cities are forgotten; they are spaces that are always in transition that, like the Ruhr region itself, are threatened by a "decay [that] necessarily [...] sets in so that [such] cities, because so much is under construction, never really come into being, at least never in the form of the city as an idol."<sup>9</sup> In other words, a suburb of Duisburg is not a suburb of Berlin. It is not a city to which visitors pilgrim with the hope of being transported to experience the mystical aura and immerse themselves in its long and fascinating history. They do not just happen upon the past, but rather, exploration begins long before arrival in Meiderich. Nevertheless, following Kluge's logic, because Duisburg, Meiderich, and the Ruhr conurbation are not "idols," creativity is not as constrained. Thus, more possibility, more aleatory discoveries, and a general resistance to objectification can be embraced by these sites. In other words, visitors do not arrive with a preordained knowledge of the site and, on reaching it, they are not swept up in its mystery or reputation. To extend what Kluge calls

9 Alexander Kluge, "The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time," *New German Critique* 49, Special issue on *Alexander Kluge* (Winter 1990): 11–22, 16.



the commuter city's "dislocation," the peripheral feeds the radicality, thus the de-monumentalization made possible through art and its consequent engagement.

In addition, Meiderich's location ten kilometres north of Duisburg means that it's not subject to the scrutiny, the endless self-focused arguments and debates, the need to please and include an international community of people and critics before taking a decision about its future. The regeneration of the Thyssen iron and steelworks was relatively without controversy when compared to the process of post-1989 memory and historical witnessing in Berlin. As Michel Foucault argues about "other spaces," the dislocation marks a contradictory site where temporal continuity is broken, where the fairground and the institution of industrialization collide, constantly transforming thanks to their unpredictable historical contexts. Thus, similar to the heterotopias discussed by Foucault, the multiple times and spaces of the Landschaftspark invite an unpredictable, even ludic, experience away from oppression and institutional instrumentality.

Moreover, we might argue that the Landschaftspark is further de-territorialized. Even though it sits within the geographical area of the Ruhr Valley conurbation, Duisburg itself is on the periphery of the region. Going even further, we might postulate that with the definitive closing of industry in 2018, the Ruhr region itself is at risk of moving towards insignificance in Germany. Cities such as Duisburg, Bochum, Essen, and Dortmund came into being with the late nineteenth-century development of industry on their outskirts. They were built in a present that promised a future of prosperity and power for the worker. It was a time when pollution was the promise of a new, man-made, machine-driven world. Today, these cities in the Ruhr Valley are outside the circle that contains history in the present. In the annals of history, their economic prosperity, thus their vibrancy, belong to the past. Hence the need to reimagine them within a different history. To be sure, the artworks across the Landschaftspark and the park itself as an artwork have the capacity to place it within a different history, namely, that of a post-industrial present.

### **The Site and Its Regeneration**

The Thyssen ironworks and steelworks were built in 1901 in the monumental style of Europe's great industrial complexes. The scale of production demanded a vertically integrated model in which Thyssen owned ore fields, coal mines, coking plants, foundries, and machine shops. The 230-hectare

site also contained a central power plant station of enormous dimensions, administrative buildings to handle the daily business of the steelworks, domestic and international exports. Homes for both owners and workers were also part of the complex. Following the mid-1970s steel crisis and the subsequent oversupply of the European steel market, the Meiderich works began to be closed in the early 1980s. After the last shift was worked on April 4, 1985, the works were decommissioned, and all buildings were left untouched.<sup>10</sup>

The complex sat idle until 1989. While everyone was focused on the events leading up to the collapse of socialism and the eventual fall of the Berlin Wall, the Internationale Bau Ausstellung (International Architecture Exhibition) or IBA was staged along the banks of the River Emscher, fully funded by the government of North Rhine Westphalia.<sup>11</sup> The “exhibition” was a ten-year, multidimensional restructuring project to re-invent the mines, steel plants, industrial halls, and slag heaps of the region, turning wastelands into ecological landscapes of cultural interest at which educational, tourist, and leisure activities would be pursued. The two-pronged goal of developing the Duisburg Landschaftspark was, in keeping with the IBA’s mission, to regenerate local communities and simultaneously bring a new cultural kudos to the Ruhr region.<sup>12</sup> There was, however, little discussion in 1989 of creating a memorial to the industrial period of Germany’s “rustbelt” region.<sup>13</sup> This emerged through the specific regeneration of the Meiderich industrial site in the following decade.

The directive was to preserve the original industrial buildings—primarily because demolishing them would be too expensive—and to use them as “sights” of engagement, participation, and contemplation.<sup>14</sup> There were also ecological and economic stipulations to address both the vast lands filled with toxic waste and rising unemployment.<sup>15</sup> Peter Latz, a Munich-based

10 See the Landschaftspark website for historical background, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.landschaftspark.de/en/>.

11 On the history and details of the IBA, accessed September 10, 2022, <https://www.internationale-bauausstellungen.de/en/history/1989-1999-iba-emscher-park-a-future-for-an-industrial-region/>.

12 See Anne Brownley Raines, “Wandel durch (Industrie) Kultur: Conservation and Renewal in the Ruhrgebiet,” *Planning Perspectives* 26 (2011): 183–207.

13 See Julia Sattler, “Narratives of Urban Transformation,” in *Urban Transformations in the U.S.A.: Spaces, Communities, Representations* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 11–28.

14 See Kerstin Barndt, “Memory Traces of an Abandoned Set of Futures: Industrial Ruins in the Postindustrial Landscapes of Germany,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 270–93, 279.

15 See Joern Langhorst, “Re-presenting Transgressive Ecologies: Post-Industrial Sites as Contested Terrains,” *Local Environment* 9, no. 10 (2014): 1110–33.

landscape architect, won the competition to regenerate the Meiderich site, and the project began in 1994. Latz proposed to leave all buildings in place, re-use materials from the site for all interventions, and ultimately, return it to its pre-industrial natural state through large-scale landscape architecture.<sup>16</sup> The structural ruins were to be used for a range of leisure activities—theatre and music performances in the main buildings, walking, cycling in the grounds, a diving centre in a former gasometer, rock climbing and children's playgrounds in old bunkers. In the vast garden and natural spaces, visitors would be invited to wander paths cut along the transport lines of the original mine and mill complex. On their walks, visitors would discover wildflowers, natural rock formations, enjoy unique views of the industrial complex from atop slag heaps, and venture through underground structures. Today, these passages and discoveries are central to the site in its totality as anti-monuments in anti-narratives that question the rationalization and discourses of power pervading the industrial complex in its heyday. Unlike the prescriptive narratives of the nineteenth-century museum display, the Landschaftspark has a network of routes from which visitors choose their path through the complex. The adventure of walking and discovering embraces multiple histories, stories, and perspectives of the past. Thus, as visitors explore the past, they soon understand the loss and transformation experienced by those whose identities were entwined with nineteenth-century industry.

### Criticism of the Regeneration

The criticisms of Latz's regeneration are consistent: while it creates innovative and radical approaches to learning about the industrial region, the park does not didactically raise consciousness about the practices and processes that oppressed workers in the past. There is no museum, or official "guided tour" of the facilities, no simulation of the exploitation we know to have been carried out at the site. In addition, despite the Landschaftspark's de-emphasis on the sublime of the industrial structures through highlighting the importance of individual discovery and encounter, it erases the historical trajectory of economic exploitation and all indicators of social class. In addition, there is no sign of the destruction caused by production processes in mines and mills, references to exploitation of workers, or the

16 Peter Latz, *Rust Red: The Landscape Park Duisburg-Nord* (Munich: Hirmer, 2017).

deaths incurred there.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, critics argue that the Landschaftspark is a postmodern aesthetic experience effacing all consciousness of the past, affirming the economic and power relations that brought about suffering in the first place.<sup>18</sup> According to these arguments, the complex affirms, rather than contests, the destructive logic of industrial production.

There is, however, another way of interpreting the Landschaftspark. Namely, when explored at ground level, a more substantial argument emerges for how it has the potential to enable, rather than stymie, multiple and creative memories, memories that might lead visitors to reflect on and understand the past. In its function as a living archive through which visitors wander and explore, discover, examine, and reflect on objects and structures, they process the past in unique ways, creating individual histories and renewed memories. As a result, visitors transgress, resist, and reimagine a future based on their own interactions in the present. This is not to devalue the critique of the regeneration for its ignorance of workers' oppression, but rather, to put forward an ancillary perspective privileging the imagination made possible through bodily experience of such sites. Common to many post-industrial sites, the perspectives and experiences in the Landschaftspark are multiple. My analysis is only one such possible means of interpretation.

As revealed in the example of the park as aesthetic experience, two factors drive the multiple real and imagined memories brought to life in the location. First, the park's incitation to movement and physical engagement with the past, and second, the encounter with the ghosts of the industrial past in the course of that movement. To elaborate: the visitor's unplanned movement around the park leads to a form of getting lost that happens when the blast furnaces, power houses, and aerial train system slip out of sight. While the soaring structures are coated in a patina of golden rust, glowing in the midday sun, transforming them into icons to a glorious past, the park encourages multiple, fragmented, and partial experiences, experiences from which the buildings disappear altogether. The slow obfuscation of structures comes, in large part, due to the expanse of the park. Thus, as visitors move further from the one-time centres of industrial activity, the old structures vanish from eyeshot. In addition, as visitors slip behind a wall of trees, or into a sand bunker filled with wildflowers, nature itself obscures the

17 Sarah Hemmings, and Martin Kagel, "Memory Gardens: Aesthetic Education and Political Emancipation in the *Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord*," *German Studies Review* 33, no. 2 (2010): 243–61.

18 See Langhorst, "Re-presenting Transgressive Ecologies." Other of these critiques rely on Frederic Jameson's conception of postmodernism. See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

views of the monumental, manufactured environment. Nevertheless, the industrial past is not far away and returns as visitors continue their journey through the park. Thus, any experience had in the Landschaftspark is, by definition, ephemeral. This transience affords opportunities for reflection, recollection, and new memories to emerge.

As visitors move along unpredictable paths in the vast natural landscape, (re)discovering remnants of the past, multiple possible pasts come into being. Memory is not limited to a single viewing position or a single narrative unfolding as it would be if its only source were the soaring industrial structures. Second, the ghosts of the industrial past in the form of tools, machine parts, and fittings are strewn across the landscape. These have often been transformed, repurposed, and ultimately, reimagined through artworks that invite innovative reflection on the past. That is, various pasts still exist and are available for exploration and interrogation as one wanders. Like the process of navigating an archive of not yet forgotten, but not immediately visible objects, as described by de Certeau and other theorists, these two factors come alive through the encounter with industry as artworks in the park.<sup>19</sup> I illustrate this process of encounter by discussing two examples of the park's industrial remnants turned artworks: an installation surrounded by the one-time casting and blower houses, and an "earthwork" made from the wooden sleepers of old railway tracks. These works function slightly differently as we walk or ride a bike to arrive at them and might view them while standing still. While there is also an opportunity to walk and move around the works—that is, to explore in motion—the process does not have to be one of knowledge through continual motion as was that of wandering the residual buildings as living, mutating sites for industrial memory. Through the provocation of confusion and subsequent discussion with other visitors, temporal and spatial displacement, and sensual and corporeal exploration respectively, the two further examples nevertheless have the potential to effect processes of de-monumentalization at their locations.

### *Piazza Metallica/Iron Square*

*Piazza Metallica* presents industry repurposed to create, all at once, a stage for performances, an installation, a plaza, and an artwork surrounded

19 See Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 1931–1934, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 576.

by the old blower and casting houses. Forty-nine rusting slabs taken from the former casting beds of the adjacent ferromanganese foundry are arranged in a seven-by-seven-foot square. The slabs are made from haematite iron, the material used for the lining of the casting beds on account of its unusually high melting point. Despite the hardness of the iron, before removal from the casting beds, underneath the ash and contaminated casting sand, the slabs revealed subtle markings on their surfaces. These traces of the casting process form patterns that, since 1994, have already changed with the erosion of the iron by the elements. In addition, the creases on the slab surfaces have begun to be filled with algae. The slabs themselves continue to rust, the grass continues to grow over them, and eventually, they will disappear, becoming reclaimed by nature. Depending on the weather and season of visiting, the slabs might be orange-red, blue-grey, or dark brown in colour. Depending on when in the process of decomposition one visits, the iron slabs will be more or less eroded.<sup>20</sup> They are constantly changing, variant, and, in keeping with the vision for the entire park, on their way to being returned to the natural landscape.

Before conceptualizing the work, it is useful to relate the experience *in situ*. On approaching *Piazza Metallica*, it is difficult to know what we are looking at. We ask, what are they? Are the slabs an artwork laid at the centre of a cleared, open space between industrial structures? We are pulled towards them, to walk over and around them, reflecting on their meaning. If they are indeed a sculpture, the slabs contest traditional forms and experiences of sculpture.<sup>21</sup> They are not vertical, neither placed on a pedestal, and nor are they historical monuments or memorials. At least, we do not recognize them as such because they do not reference anything other than the industrial complex around them. They are more akin to modernist sculptures in the vein of Richard Serra's steel formations or Carl André's square floors. Are the forty-nine slabs neither sculpture nor installation? Perhaps they are simply objects left over from the industrial past? If so, we ask, were they the base of a building? Or a piece of machinery? Why are they arranged so neatly in a square? There is no written signage to answer these questions, to indicate what we are looking at, or to direct us in how to look at the slabs. Nothing tells us the iron squares have been taken from the former blast furnace at their edges.

20 Latz, *Rust Red*, 240–47.

21 On classical sculpture as memorial, see Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (1979): 30–44.

Eventually, over time, as we stand looking at them confusedly, other visitors might join us and begin to discuss the slabs. Given the unpredictability and aleatory course of the visitor's journey, it is not a given and neither is it necessary that the experience of the *Piazza Metallica* be collective. However, in keeping with the work and processes once undertaken in the space, the exploration of the work with others offers a rich understanding. Together, we look up at the towering furnace that surrounds *Piazza Metallica*, wondering about the relationship between the slabs and the building. In discussion with others, we decide that the fusion of the industrial and the artistic at *Piazza Metallica* pushes us to ask more questions: what is the relationship between art and industry here at *Piazza Metallica*? By turns, what are the consequences of this one-time site of strenuous and life-threatening work becoming connected to leisure activities in the present. We consider the impossible reconciliation of the theatricality of the monumental furnace and the simplicity and functionality of iron as material. The proliferation of contradictions pointed up by iron slabs surrounded by the relics of nineteenth-century industry eventually expose the irreconcilability of work and leisure, past and present, the multiple perspectives on the past. Thus, *Piazza Metallica*'s refusal to reveal itself raises questions, incites discussion, and leads to interrogation of the past.

However we understand it, *Piazza Metallica* also transforms industry into an aesthetic, becoming a stage to be performed on, an icon to be looked at. Like the sculptures of Serra and André, the iron work orients and forces contortions of our bodies by pulling us towards it, enticing us to bend down and examine it up close, to traverse and explore the physical space of the complex differently. As we experience the work and our bodies, standing at different angles and taking up different positions in relationship to the slabs, our engagement gives *Piazza Metallica* further phenomenological richness. Unlike fully abstract sculpture as Rosalind Krauss characterizes it, the slabs are not removed from the passing of time.<sup>22</sup> They are not existing only in the moment of interaction with the viewer or visitor. The work mediates between past and present, literally spanning the temporal shifts that the slabs as lining of the furnaces have survived, and the aggressive processes of production they have witnessed. As we walk over and around the slabs, we too move between past and present, examining them as artwork to be looked at with aesthetic value, as objects to be interrogated, asked questions of and reflected on. This process of engaged inquiry through movement and interaction with other visitors prompts us into thinking about the past

22 Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 33.

of the squares, the complex, and by extension, the processes of industrial production it housed. We are led to remember the history of the site, the stories that unfolded there, their movement through time and subsequent decomposition. Our physical movement, together with the changing face of the slabs, gives them and us a potentiality to point up multiple meanings from the past, through the present, and into the future.

*Piazza Metallica* also behaves like the earthworks that critiqued capitalism and ecological destruction in the 1960s and 1970s. The resistance of the slabs to stasis—thanks to their gradual return to nature—is exemplary of the way the regenerated site itself resists rehearsing the ode to capitalism of which it has been accused. The slabs, like other examples of industry transformed into art, also resist commodification. Like site-specific earthworks of Robert Smithson, Alice Laycock, or Robert Morris these “interventions” are both and neither art and/or industry. Rather, as Krauss would have it, they “mark a site,” mapping “the features of the architectural experience,”<sup>23</sup> or in this case, industrial landscape. Such works open out the landscape beyond its significance as a site of industry. Like earthworks or site-specific landscape interventions, when seen in this way, our focus shifts from the medium of the slabs’ fabrication to the tensions they stir up in relationship to their environment, the conditions of the space they occupy, and the cultural conditions of their historical moment. Akin to the results of spending time in an archive, fossicking, making discoveries, tracing the history of the evidence, we consequently form a fuller, more complex, multilayered image and understanding of the past.

### *Fern Spiral*

In another example from Latz’s regeneration, *Fern Spiral* is a land artwork made of birch logs that were the sleepers to the railway lines used to transport coal and other materials for nearly a century. The logs are laid horizontally in the shape of a spiral in a private garden that was once out of bounds to the workers, only accessible through a small gate at the end of a narrow path.<sup>24</sup> Over time, the wood has rotted, and ferns have

23 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 41.

24 In keeping with the strict rules for working in the Duisburg Meiderich complex, workers were confined to the buildings and structures where they worked. For more on the organization of the living and working spaces at the mine, see Stefan Berger, Christian Wicke, and Jana Golombek, “Burdens of Eternity?: Heritage, Identity, and the ‘Great Transition’ in the Ruhr,” *The Public Historian* 39, no. 4 (November 2017): 21–43.



grown around and over the logs, destroying the shape of the spiral. At twenty-year intervals, the spiral will be rebuilt with renewable materials, thereby introducing a dialogue between the natural process of permanence and change, creation, and decay.<sup>25</sup> *Fern Spiral* purifies the toxicity and destruction of industry, returning it to an ecologically sustainable, biodiverse natural ruin, yielding precisely the discourse of historical continuity and reintegration that was Latz's underlying motivation. Like the above-mentioned 1960s and 1970s earthworks, *Fern Spiral* pushes beyond existing concepts of the marriage of art and industry, as well as that of art and commodification, resisting the tendency of museums and other institutions to ossify.

In an obvious reference to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) at Great Salt Lake, Utah, *Fern Spiral* takes materials of nature once appropriated by industry and returns them to the natural environment. The work thereby points back to a long history: it looks beyond nineteenth-century industry to a pre-industrial natural landscape. In addition, as it erodes over time, *Fern Spiral* envisions the future of its own ruin. To use Smithson's conception of the mutual influence and formation of art and landscape, as an artwork in a state of ongoing transformation whose form is never fixed, undergoing decay from the moment of its creation, *Fern Spiral* is bound for its own obsolescence. This conception as a "ruin in reverse" removes it from the clutching shadows of institutions.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, like the ailing industrial sites that Smithson sees across the Passaic River in Rutherford New Jersey, the memory traces in a work such as *Fern Spiral* envision their own ruin before they were built in the late nineteenth century. They announce that the contemporary Meiderich complex is an archive of memory objects. In turn, through their gradual disappearance, this is a contemporary landscape discrediting the former industrial complex as "out of date," even before the first engines were fired in 1902.<sup>27</sup>

What of this experience of aestheticization and pleasure for the visitor wandering the park? Is this not simply an invitation to the bourgeois visitor to mystify industrial processes? If so, doesn't this invitation ultimately lead to social disenfranchisement, rather than empathy for or understanding of

25 Latz, *Rust Red*, 234–35.

26 Smithson, "Cultural Confinement." For this connection, I am grateful to Peter Muir, "The Object of Memory in Robert Smithson's 'The Monuments of Passaic,'" presented at *Rethinking the Past: International Conference Memory / Archive / Document—Arts and Architecture*, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, November 9, 2018.

27 Robert Smithson, "A Tour of The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum*, December 1967: 52–57. Republished in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Flam, 64–67.

the worker? Do the fusions of industry and art yielding new narratives of past, present, and future mark a site where objects are encountered, rather than defining the identity of the one who worked there?

At face value, it is true, *Piazza Metallica* and *Fern Spiral* as artworks are removed from direct reference to the past. Unlike a location marked by a sculptural monument for example, the enormity of the events that took place there are not overtly represented. Accordingly, the artworks' symbolic concerns are removed from the conditions of former workers' alienation. Similarly, the one-time separation of landscape and industry are effaced from the artworks, thus emphasizing absence. The artworks may create memories of the past, but these are indeed memories without the details of those who lived them.

Nevertheless, simultaneously, in the present, former workers will recognize locations, traces, structures and be led to remember the work they did there. Visitors whose identities were once influenced or determined by their work at these structures are free to move around, to see, to conceptualize the remnants of industry, differently. They see and experience what was once prohibited from access. The present experiences and the works' inherent reference to a future with reconsidered multiple pasts surely points up the possibility of new memories at *Fern Spiral* and *Piazza Metallica*? This reforming of history at the personal level experienced through interaction with the works also leads to a de-spatialization. That is, the spaces are no longer tied to the inflexible structures and routines of industrial production, both for workers and the machines they once operated. The new narratives are coloured by the absence of authority, commodification, and oppression. In addition, the prohibition to enter spaces that dominated the past encounter with the site is lifted. In turn, it can be imagined that these visitors will pass their stories on to the next generation. Thus, sites and spaces are transformed from something to be worked at, into a mediation between past and present, in which re-remembering brings the redefinition of space to the fore.

## Conclusion

The dis-located site is both de-temporalized and de-spatialized. Nevertheless, its availability for informal use and activities make it what Michael Rothberg would call a "multi-directional" site: it avoids stagnation in the present and is better conceived as a series of relations between nodes on a

circuit of exploration.<sup>28</sup> This conception is in distinction to holding up the soaring and sublime blast furnaces as symbols of the glory of nineteenth-century industry. Such a move would effectively hide or render invisible the discordances and injustices of the past. Given the historical dislocation and displacement of Meiderich, Duisburg, and the Ruhr region, together with the architectural landscaping of the park, the renewal process can be understood as a de-coding and re-coding, or de- and re-territorialization.<sup>29</sup> For the authors, such liberatory processes draw attention to the outsized role that the state and forces of resistance play in shaping our modern encounters with the past and historical memory. The regeneration process is, in this sense, akin to the memorialization of any German historical event or structure that refuses celebration and idolatry.<sup>30</sup>

Jonathan Bach says of the Berlin Wall Memorial at Bernauer Strasse in Berlin:

In the production of collective memory, temporality is at the forefront of this dance of de-coding and re-coding of space: memory sites play complex games with time by keeping the past visible and comprehensible in the present, curating narratives and conveying sentiments. Sites of memory are about framing time, the time frame, in German *Zeitraum*, or literally, time-space. Distinct from space-time, which physicists use to refer to the fusion of time and three-dimensional space, time-space might be thought of as the dislocation and relocation of time and space necessary to creating the presence of the past in a particular location. This dis/re-location has a very specific purpose: to keep a particular place from being fully assimilated into the present and therefore unmarked as a site of memory.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, if we approach the Landschaftspark from the perspective of its engagement in a process of a de-coding and re-coding, the industrial period is understood differently. Moreover, when the park is seen through

28 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

29 These special metaphors were first coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For Deleuze and Guattari, the re-territorialization of spaces authored by power and money is a form of reclaiming space.

30 Andreas Huyssen, "Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, no. 2 (January 1993): 249–61.

31 Jonathan Bach, "The Berlin Wall after the Berlin Wall: Site into Sight," *Memory Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 48–62, 49.

the lens of its structures and materials from a perspective of the present, it represents a form of de-monumentalization. It is an ever-evolving place where contemplation of industry as artworks opens a door to renewed understandings of the past in the present.

Duisburg's Landschaftspark has the capacity to facilitate a process of de-monumentalization. This potentiality is realized in an experience of the past characterized by engaging visitors in individual physical relationships with the events, activities, and work that took place within the vast complex. As I have demonstrated, the invisible in Landschaftspark is always in the process of becoming sensate and material. Likewise, the material of industry is always in the process of becoming invisible. In turn, this ephemerality is the radicality of the site as an anti-museum. It is true that the objects and interventions offer an encounter with sublime objects of a past in which contemplation is inevitable, but looking is only the beginning. Looking leads to walking which, in turn, becomes climbing over and around structures in a process of discovery and questioning. The lack of orientation within the park and inside the structures slows the visitor down: we pause at sites where the material of history made into artworks is observed. We bend over, we examine, we question. We remember.

I have offered a somewhat utopian interpretation of the Landschaftspark regeneration experience. Indeed, it is important to remember that, in reality, problems remain. For example, one wonders where the workers are today, especially when wandering the paths of the revitalized park. And, what happens when those who worked in the mines and mills are no longer alive to tell their stories? How will history be understood when they can no longer pass on their stories directly? In addition, I have not dwelt on the fact that the park as home to objects and structures available for re-interpretation is built by a government and professionals who, by default, impose the power dynamic of money and class on the creation of space.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, I have said nothing of the most deeply buried past: the National Socialist use of the ironworks to manufacture weapons for which they used prisoners of war as slave labour. Neither have I mentioned the containment of Jewish prisoners in buildings used as barracks during the war.<sup>33</sup> I have also minimized Latz's utopian notion that, in time, the site will return to

32 On power of institutional archives to shape memory and identity, see Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1–19.

33 George Hargreaves, "Large Parks: A Designer's Perspective," in *Large Parks*, ed. Julia Czerniak and George Hargreaves (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 120–73.

nature. If nothing else, it erases the area's history as sparsely inhabited marshland. Furthermore, the social and infrastructural problems in and around contemporary Duisburg—abandoned buildings, unemployment, drug addiction—cast my proposition as a naïve solution for a harsh reality. The idea that any area of Duisburg can return to an idyllic pre-industrial revolution landscape when the fallout from industry is everywhere present on the contemporary urbanscape is a fantasy. However, ultimately, art that inspires de-monumentalization of an industrial site and resistance to the mechanisms and dynamics that maintained the oppression of some over others cannot be ignored. The works' provocation to reconsider the industrial period through the lens of its structures and materials from the perspective of the present, pointing to the possibility of an integrated future, is a step in the right direction. Similarly, even though it is only one perspective on the revitalized park, mine is an interpretation available to the hundreds of thousands of annual visitors, particularly those who become informed of the site's past as they discover the present.<sup>34</sup> Thus, in the regenerated Landschaftspark, industry transformed into artworks offers a doorway to, if not a blueprint for renewed memories and histories of a contentious past.

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### About the Author

**Frances Guerin** teaches film and visual culture at the University of Kent. She is the author of *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (2005), *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany* (2012), and *The Truth Is Always Grey: A History of Modernist Painting* (2018), all with University of Minnesota Press. Her most recent book is *Jacqueline Humphries* (Lund Humphries, 2022).





## 5. Reclaiming Industrial Heritage through Affect

Art Interventions in the Ruined Factories of Post-socialist Albania

*Dimitra Gkitsa*

### Abstract

This chapter explores the post-socialist condition using as an entry point the under-represented industrial ruination in Albania. This is developed by discussing three specific art projects that work with post-industrial ruined sites in Albania: Enisa Cenaliaj's performance *Welcome Dear Workers* (2005) at the former Stalin Textile Factory in Tirana, the site-specific installations of the exhibition *Informal Mind* (2014), taking place at the ruins of the Metallurgical Factory in Elbasan, and Driant Zeneli's video installation *Maybe the Cosmos Is Not So Extraordinary* (2019). The chapter argues that post-industrial ruined spaces are sites of modern heritage which can offer an alternative reading of the socialist history, transforming the difficult knowledge of the past into critical articulations about the conditions that define the present.

**Keywords:** post-industrialism; industrial ruination; factory; Albanian art; post-socialism; collective memory

After 1945, Albania had one of the most repressive, centralized, and totalitarian socialist regimes, remaining for nearly five decades the isolated "other" of Europe.<sup>1</sup> During state socialism, many were executed

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Albanian are my own unless otherwise noted. Enver Hoxha, leader of the Party, came to power in 1944. When the Party was founded in 1941, it was named the Communist Party of Albania (Partia Komuniste e Shqipërisë, PKSh). In 1948, in consultation

or sent into internal exile while ideas that did not accord with those of the socialist regime were punished. The collapse of state socialism in 1991 was followed by political and financial turmoil which culminated in a civil war in 1997.<sup>2</sup> This reality drastically defined the ways that the socialist past has been re-visited in the post-socialist reality. The past of the socialist regime became a shameful chapter in history that needed to be erased from public discourse. Most recently, the socialist history has been approached by anti-communist voices whose aim is to rediscover the crimes committed under state socialism. As a result, buildings from the socialist past have turned into spaces of “dark tourism.” Projects such as the House of Leaves—Museum of Secret Surveillance (Shtëpia me Gjethe) which opened in 2017 in the building that held the Directorate of State Security—displayed surveillance technology together with names and photographs of those executed or sent into internal exile under Party Secretary Enver Hoxha’s leadership. Similarly, in 2014, Bunk’Art, a former bunker on the outskirts of Tirana, was turned into a history museum, dedicated to revealing military operations and the brutality of the socialist regime. In Shkodër, a city in the north of Albania, the Site of Witness and Memory (Vendi i Dëshmisë dhe Kujtesës) was also established in 2014 as the first site of remembrance in a former prison. The site includes a museum with an exhibition on the former communist regime’s concentration camps. Historic buildings which are not sites of “dark tourism” have either been demolished or left to decay. For instance, May 2020 saw the demolition of the National Theatre in Tirana. The demolition followed a two-year period of protests and was accompanied by police violence and arrests.<sup>3</sup> However, locations such as the Pyramid, a museum, designed by Hoxha’s daughter dedicated to his legacy, although considered for demolition ten years ago, is now in the hands of a foreign architectural firm which envisions its regeneration into a youth centre. The idea occurred following youth

with Joseph Stalin, Hoxha renamed it the Party of Labour of Albania (Partia e Punës e Shqipërisë, PPSH) to reflect the transformation of Albanians from peasants to a homogenized working class.

2 The civil war took place from January 16 to August 11, 1997. In the 1990s Albania adapted a market economy dominated by pyramid schemes. These schemes collapsed in 1997 and the country lost almost half its GDP. Multiple violent protests followed when civilians gained access to army depots under orders by then prime minister and leader of the Democratic Party, Sali Berisha.

3 For a discussion of the Albanian management of culture’s demolition of historic landmarks and subsequent erection of commercial buildings, see Valentina Di Liscia, “Open Letter Condemns the ‘Artwashing’ of Albanian Prime Minister’s Politics,” *Hyperallergic*, May 2020, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/565114/open-letter-condemns-artwashing-albania/>.

groups' use of the Pyramid as a site for social gathering despite its state of ruination and decline.<sup>4</sup>

The above reality has led to two factors that are dominant in the post-socialist society. The first is the collective memory of the socialist past, a memory which is still difficult to comprehend and articulate. The second is what to do with the visual and material remnants of this past which are still present in the public space. How can we reclaim and coexist with this difficult heritage imbued with contested historical and political connotations?

This chapter puts forward an alternative exploration of the post-socialist condition using post-industrial ruins as an entry point. While historical buildings in the centre of major Albanian cities are in the spotlight of debates on whether they can be restored and reused or simply demolished, former socialist factories lie in decay, ignored on the rural peripheries. This chapter argues that such spaces are sites of modern heritage which can offer an alternative reading of the socialist history, transforming the difficult knowledge of the past into critical articulations about the conditions that define the present. The chapter engages with contemporary artworks that re-inhabit abandoned factories in Albania. This is an attempt to move beyond established discourses which overwhelmingly read the socialist past through the lens of trauma.<sup>5</sup> To position the memory of the socialist past only within the framework of trauma, and as such, to approach it through narratives of pain, shame, and state violence, has made the material heritage "unwanted." Moving away from such narratives, this chapter approaches socialist post-industrial heritage as affective sites of difficult knowledge production. Difficult knowledge,

emerges when we consider memory—in its spatial, material, public dimensions—not simply as latent in the social fabric, nor only in top-down efforts by the state to encode preferred memory, but also as it is

4 Formerly known as the "Enver Hoxha Museum," the Pyramid was named after its shape.

5 Historic trauma has found resonance in various fields of public life. For instance, in the 1990s, jurisdictional decisions such as the lustration law "On Genocide and Crimes against Humanity Committed in Albania during the Communist Regime for Political, Ideological and Religious Motives" aimed to purge government officials and public servants who previously collaborated with the regime. In the 2000s, organizations such as the Institute for the Study of Communist Crime were established. Their purpose is to gather data on issues related to the violation of human rights committed during the socialist regime, the conditions of concentration camps, and the expropriation of private properties. More recently, many intense debates have taken place in the media and within intellectual circles with voices demanding to ban the broadcasting of films and other visual materials from the socialist era.

mindfully deployed by individuals and groups in attempts to provoke, enable, and transform.<sup>6</sup>

Affect renders this type of difficult knowledge visible. Affect is felt. Yet, it is also a knowledge that might disturb, perhaps cause more questions, or reveal new relations in the ways that we think of or feel towards the past. Contrary to artworks that represent a traumatic past, those analysed here render again contemporary the socialist legacy of industrialism in Albania, creating the affective relations for knowledge production on present issues related to labour, unemployment, and precarity.

### **(Post)industrialism in Albania**

After the Second World War, Albania was a semi-feudal country, defined by social conservatism and outdated means of production. Adapting the Soviet model, the Communist Party set out a series of five-year plans to industrialize Albania. The First (1951–55) and Second (1956–60) Plans focused on the agricultural sector, while the Third Plan (1961–65) on the development of small handcraft factories. The Fourth Plan (1966–70) inaugurated a period of intense industrialization with large industrial complexes built on the outskirts of major cities: a nitrogen fertilizer factory in Fier, a rubber factory in Durrës, a textile factory in Berat, a hydroelectric plant in Shkodër, and chromium mining in Bulqizë are some of the countless industrial units built at this time. New towns were also created from scratch to accommodate factory workers. For instance, Poliçan, a town in south Albania, was constructed in the 1960s, simultaneous with the establishment of the armoury factory.

With Albania being ethnically and religiously diverse, industrialization was a strategy to transform the peasant communities into a homogenized working-class entity. Populations started moving into the new industrial urban centres where they lived, learned, and worked together. In this spirit of socialist unification, the Party banned religion. Hoxha declared that Albania itself was the new religion; the socialist ideology was the single belief. The collective ethos was particularly evident with the youth labour action brigades. More than just an apparatus promoting a Marxist-Leninist ideology, the youth labour brigades built the country's infrastructure after

6 Erica Lehrer, Monica Eileen Milton, and Cynthia E. Patterson, eds., *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Spaces* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

the ruins of the Second World War, and their contribution was particularly evident in the construction of the railway system and the electrification of rural areas.

In the late 1950s, more than half of the Albanian population was illiterate.<sup>7</sup> The new skills that were needed both in constructing, and later, in operating the factories led many people into formal education. Women benefited from this process. The Party's plan for women's emancipation was a strategy to compensate for labour shortages but, at the same time, it shifted the norms of a traditional and patriarchal society. By the 1980s, nearly one half of the country's students in universities were women. In the industrial sector, women comprised 43.5 per cent of the overall workforce.<sup>8</sup> Although industrialization was a core part of the regime's broader political agenda, it also brought with it social development.

Industrialization in Albania was also connected to the Party's plan to make the country self-sufficient and autonomous. Having broken ties with Yugoslavia as early as 1948 and with the Soviet Union in 1961, Albania was financially dependent on China to fund major industrial developments for a short period. In 1978, these relations ended due to Hoxha's aspirations to make Albania politically, financially, and diplomatically independent. As a result, the country became completely isolated. Hoxha stated that "the Party's programme to develop a complex industry, a heavy or a light one, for its enlargement with new sectors of modern production was proven from practice to have been a programme completely realisable."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Albania reached its industrialization peak in an astonishingly short period of time. However, this progress came at great cost and, without the aid of stronger allies, mainly China and USSR, Albania's industrial plants became practically unsustainable. The extreme isolation destroyed the country's economy and, at the same time, exhausted Albanian citizens who at that point were craving individual freedoms that were essentially forbidden and non-existent.

The collapse of state socialism brought the decline of industrialism in Albania. New political parties that had formed with the collapse of the socialist regime hailed, "Let's destroy the old." It was the slogan of their new *status quo* in the 1990s, reflecting the attitude towards the industrial sector

7 Judith Harford and Tom O'Donoghue, *A Cultural History of Education in the Modern Age*, vol. 6 (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 142.

8 Raymond Zickel and Walter R. Iwaskiw, eds., *Albania: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1994), 80 and 132.

9 Enver Hoxha, *Raport në Kongresin e VII të PPSH* (Report in the Seventh Congress of PPSH), (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1976), 4.

and the wider infrastructure built during the socialist regime. State-owned non-operating factories were abandoned.<sup>10</sup> The few privatized operating factories continued production with a significantly reduced workforce, unfair working conditions, and unregulated emissions of dangerous pollutants.

In the diverse literature on post-industrialism, researchers have noted that the closure of industrial plants alters the urban fabric and destroys the livelihoods of local communities which rely on the operations of the factory.<sup>11</sup> Post-industrialism in Eastern Europe has additional peculiarities because of its intertwining with the socialist past. In this case, factories were not owned by private capital entities competing on an open market. They belonged to the state, and, in principle, they existed for the whole society, not just the financial profit of an individual factory owner. Similarly, the destruction of factories in the post-socialist space did not occur after a financial crisis. The collapse of the socialist regime also meant the collapse of the state, its ideology, its social institutions, and its very system of understanding life and work.

Examining post-industrial decay and post-socialism, Anca Pusca notes that the ruination of former factories “frees them of the utopian communist rhetoric embedded in them, but at the same time also, burdens them with new questions about the possibility of creating non-utopian spaces/ reflections/ representations” in the present.<sup>12</sup> This is accurate in the case of Albania. Rural cities, which were previously inhabited by populations employed in heavy industry, were left abandoned and empty. The ruined industrial spaces became active witnesses to the changes that followed the collapse of state socialism. Despite their abandonment, industrial ruins were and continue to be part of an existing urban fabric, offering ground for negotiating the present.

What forms and methods can these negotiations receive? What is the affective realization that results when engaging with the post-industrial heritage? The art projects analysed in the next section engage with both the material remnants and the intangible histories associated with ruined factories. They do so to speak about the changes that have occurred in the post-industrial post-socialist Albanian society.

10 Research on the industrial heritage of Albania, conducting a survey on 172 industrial sites showed that, although 47 per cent of the socialist industrial sites are in good condition, 22 per cent are at risk, 7 per cent at extreme risk, and 3 per cent at grave risk. Five per cent of the factories have vanished. Brian Ayers and Ilir Parangoni, “Industrial Heritage in Albania: An Assessment,” *Industrial Archaeology Review* 37, no. 2 (2015): 111–22, 122.

11 See Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), especially 199.

12 Anca Pusca, *Post-Communist Aesthetics: Revolutions, Capitalism, Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 66.

## Remembering the “Women’s Neighbourhood”

In March 2005, contemporary Albanian artist Enisa Cenaliaj stood on a tall empty pedestal in front of the former Stalin Textile Factory in the Kombinat neighbourhood of Tirana, her body towering over the passers-by who had gathered around the unusual spectacle. The artist was dressed in a worker’s uniform while her whole body was covered in white paint, resembling a socialist statue of a worker (fig. 5.1). A nearby banner displayed the title of the performance piece—*Welcome Dear Workers (Mirësevini të Dashur Punëtorë)*.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the forty-minute performance, the artist stood still, keeping her eyes closed. Although she remained still, her body was tilted forward in the suggestion of motion. During the socialist regime, the same pedestal held the statue of Joseph Stalin. It was a remnant of Albania’s ties with the Soviet Union. The artist stood on the pedestal at rush hour, starting her performance at 3.30pm, when the public space was busy with workers. However, this time they were not factory workers. The ruined buildings of the industrial complex are now commercial spaces with small private businesses that no longer involve the intense physical labour of factory work. Despite the statuesque pose and its adaptation of the imagery of socialist realism, the performance was not intended to be about historical modes of representation, and neither was it meant as a commemoration of the socialist past. On the contrary, it was designed to be about the very transformation of the working class in the neoliberal society of Albania. Talking about this performance, the artist commented:

I believe that the workers of the socialist times are, in essence, the same workers that we see today, except that in those days the conditions were the same for everyone and today the working conditions are much worse [...] My placing the worker on a pedestal had nothing to do with the role played by statues in the time of the dictatorship. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that this class [the working class] still exists—not just that they exist, but that they must insist on the rights that, at minimum, should belong to them. It’s an attempt to say, “people, listen, we exist, and we deserve better.”<sup>14</sup>

13 The performance was part of *1.60 Insurgent Space*, curated by Italian artist and curator Stefano Romano, during which site-specific performances and actions were made in public spaces of Tirana as an investigation of the capital’s urban areas.

14 Cited in Raino Isto, “Representing the Worker in the Postsocialist Public Space: Art and Politics under Neoliberalism,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 98 (Fall 2020): 43–76, 59.



Figure 5.1: Enisa Cenaliaj, *Welcome, Dear Workers (Mirësevini të Dashur Punëtorë)*, 2005, Former Stalin Textile Factory, Kombinat neighbourhood, Tirana, Albania. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



The performance grew out of the artist's observations of the changes that happened in the working-class populations of the Kombinat neighbourhood of Tirana after the collapse of socialism. Inaugurated in 1949, this textile factory had a particular significance for Tirana. This neighbourhood, Kombinat (the Albanian word meaning "industrial complex"), took its name from the textile factory which was in the area. At that time, Kombinat was not a neighbourhood of Tirana, but an autonomous satellite town separated from the capital by agricultural fields. This new residential area was inhabited by people employed at the factory. By the 1950s, the neighbourhood consisted of thirty thousand residents and included the facilities of a typical urban settlement: hospital, schools, kindergarten, and police station.<sup>15</sup>

The history of the textile factory is connected to the history of women's emancipation in Albania. When the factory started operating in 1949, a textile school in the same area was inaugurated. The garment industry was traditionally considered to offer suitable work for women. Young girls and women moved from across Albania to receive training with the promise of employment at the textile factory. For this reason, Kombinat was known as the "women's neighbourhood." While during state socialism, Tirana was inhabited by the intelligentsia, and internal migration was strictly regulated, meaning that people from the countryside could not move to the capital, Kombinat became the first working-class neighbourhood close to the capital. Workers were trained together and shared the same living spaces in apartments that were constructed for those employed in the factory, generating a strong community bond in Kombinat. The industrial complex included sleeping areas for the workers and a public community library. Cultural events, such as theatre and music performances, were organized regularly in the factory's courtyard.

The textile factory ceased to exist with the collapse of socialism. With fabrics being predominately imported at a lower cost from China, textile factories did not attract private investors. As Tirana expanded after socialism, Kombinat grew into an integral neighbourhood of the capital with its name being the only reminder that this area was once an industrial centre. The exterior façade that remains from the former factory bears visible signs of decay despite the many small shops, kiosks, unofficial second-hand markets, and private businesses now attached to the structure of the original building. The size and number of public spaces which once surrounded the factory

15 Eled Fagu, "Heritage of Planned Socialist Towns in Albania," *Proceedings of the 2nd ICAUD International Conference in Architecture and Urban Design*, no. 305 (May 2014): 1–8, 5, accessed March 17, 2023. <http://dspace.epoka.edu.al/bitstream/handle/1/897/305.pdf?sequence=1>.

have decreased. Although factory workers as a group no longer occupy this area, the neighbourhood is still inhabited by people living in precarious conditions and working unstable jobs, thus, making it one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Tirana. Kombinat's population has doubled in size since the 1960s, but the social cohesion has been lost and the new working class in the area is no longer homogenous. Consequently, as Cenaliaj aimed to show with her performance, working-class people remain invisible and unable to organize collectively because the contemporary conditions of labour, precarity, and exploitation have become more abstract and disparate under the current state of neoliberalism. In fact, in 2021 forced demolitions started taking place in Kombinat despite local protests. The government's plan is to regenerate the area by constructing new private apartments over a surface of one and a half million square metres. Once this is realized, the last material remnants of Tirana's industrial past will disappear from the urban fabric.

Cenaliaj's performance brought visibility to the transformations and the intensified precarity of the working-class people that followed the closure of the factory. The local people, the audience for whom this performance was made, did not respond positively to Cenaliaj's performance. They shouted that they did not want any more monuments that would commemorate socialism.<sup>16</sup> In analysing this piece, Amy Bryzgel mentions that local people "were likely not familiar with the genre of performance art."<sup>17</sup> However, I would argue that the intense emotional reactions seemed to be caused not by an unfamiliarity with public performance art, but rather, with the very history with which the artist engaged. The negative response was a demonstration of the perplexed feelings and contested memories people had about their socialist past. Following the collapse of socialism, locals expressed their distaste for and distrust of the socialist ideology through the disappearance, destruction, and vandalism of monuments and statues commemorating socialist workers, partisans, and communist heroes.<sup>18</sup> Given its visual resemblance, it is likely that passers-by would have seen Cenaliaj's body posture as an attempt to replace a previously unwanted and demolished statue (Stalin's figure) with another socialist monument.

16 Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 131.

17 Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe*, 131.

18 See Matthias Bickert, "Lapidars and Socialist Monuments as Elements of Albania's Historic Cultural Landscapes," in *Lapidari*, vol. 1, *Texts*, ed. Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (New York: Punctum Books, 2015), 105–14.

Cenaliaj's performance activates an affective imaginary. Jill Bennett describes affect as an embodied sensation and "a process of seeing feeling where feeling is both imagined and regenerated through an encounter with the artwork."<sup>19</sup> Affect invites us to think not so much about *what* an artwork represents, but rather, *how* this representation takes place. Although Cenaliaj's performance dealt with a contested history which remains difficult to comprehend fully, it refused to develop a particular narrative aimed at explaining or contextualizing that past. Instead, the affective element of the performance brought the past of the textile factory into temporal proximity with the present situation of its neighbourhood. The vulnerable body of the performance artist appeared in an area whose residents did not expect to encounter anything outside the mundane of the everyday life. The performance did not take place within the confines and the safety offered by a gallery space. It happened in a public space where no other similar artistic events had taken place before. It also appeared during a period when references to Albania's communist past received emotionally heated reactions. More specifically, the performance coincided with the time when there were intense public demands to open and make accessible the secret files of the socialist regime to further reveal its crimes and violence. Yet here, we are not facing the victims and the prosecutors of that regime as would have been the case with other public references to the socialist past. Instead, we are reminded that the body of the worker, which is illustrated by Cenaliaj's pose, is not just a marbled statue serving ideologies and hegemonies of a long gone past, and neither is it an identity that belongs to a previous repressive reality. Despite the post-socialist reformations, the worker is a lived and present organism whose living and working conditions have become more precarious than ever before.

### Reclaiming the "Steel of the Party"

The first attempt in Albania to curate an exhibition amid the post-industrial ruins was by the Multidisciplinary Art Movement (MAM), a curatorial team consisting of Albanian artists Klod Dedja and Ema Andrea. They curated the exhibition *Informal Mind* (11–15 October 2014), aiming to revisit the country's industrial past, while also reflecting on the changes that

19 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 41.

occurred in post-socialist Albanian society. In this vein, the exhibition brought together contemporary artists from Albania and Eastern Europe, who showcased their work in the abandoned factories of the Metallurgical Complex (Kombinati Metalurgjik) in Elbasan.<sup>20</sup>

*Informal Mind* included both newly commissioned site-specific artworks made in dialogue with the industrial ruins of the Metallurgical Complex and pre-existing art pieces. Pre-existing artworks included for instance, the video piece *Answer Me* (2008) by Albanian artist Anri Sala, which shows a woman struggling to communicate with a man whose voice is a dramatic cacophonous noise. *Answer Me* is a study on the aesthetics of moving image, sound, time, and the politics of modern life which are common themes in Sala's works. Other artworks included Sadik Spahija's *Under Pressure* (2012), a huge bust of the Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi, which the Albanian artist uses as a parody to speak about corruption in contemporary politics. Also included was the performance piece *Asylum* (2014), by Serbian artists Marina Marković and Boris Šribar, dealing with the human right to asylum. All the participating artists were invited to choose a specific space within the abandoned industrial plant to exhibit their work. On the one hand, this highlighted the curatorial decision to step back, allowing the artists to experiment with the aesthetics of the industrial ruination. On the other, it meant that the exhibition lacked a curatorial narrative that is usually crucial to contemporary art exhibitions.<sup>21</sup> During the exhibition, which lasted five days, the ruins of the Metallurgical Complex were covered with bright colours and inhabited once again, not with workers, but with exhibition viewers. Audiences were a mix of locals and visitors from Albania's neighbouring countries. Similarly, the manual labour once performed in the factory was substituted by an immaterial labour performed by freelance artists and curators without stable working space or labour conditions.

20 The exhibition included twenty-eight artists that work with diverse media and practices. Participating artists were Anri Sala, Sislej Xhafa, Robert Gligorov, Victor Alimpiev, Sadik Spahija, Alban Muja, Fatmir Mustafa-Carlos, Alban Hajdini, Edit Pula, Shelbatra Jashari, Milena Jovicević, Brilant Pireva, Marina Markovic and Boris Šribar, Sanja Latinović and Ranko Đanković, Fatos Qerimi, and Conny Karlsson Lundgren.

21 Many writers have pointed out the power that exhibition narratives have in constructing art histories and in producing discursive platforms. See, for instance, Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999); Paul O'Neil, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2012); Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012).

“Albanians’ pride and joy” or “the Steel of the Party,” as the Metallurgical Complex used to be called during state socialism, was the country’s largest industrial site and first steel plant. The complex was the culmination of Albania’s industrial revolution when heavy industry works functioned at their highest capacity. Hoxha declared that the Metallurgical Complex represented for Albanians, “the second liberation of the country after the Second World War.”<sup>22</sup> He indicated that the country was making a leap into achieving economic autarchy and reaching the peak of its socialist modernity through the work at the complex.

The Metallurgical Complex was constructed on the outskirts of Elbasan, a city at the centre of Albania, fifty kilometres from the capital, Tirana. Elbasan had a symbolic value, having been an important crossroads for commerce since Roman antiquity. The erection of the steel plant changed the urban landscape, making Elbasan a central, but also, the most polluted city in Albania. With 520 buildings, a transport network system connected to the national railway, cable car, and streets, the Metallurgical Complex was approximately half the size of Elbasan at that time. Various professional schools opened to train a new generation of workers specializing in metallurgy. By 1989, the Metallurgical Complex employed twelve thousand workers.<sup>23</sup>

The closure of the Metallurgical Complex brought on the decline of Elbasan. In the 1990s, some factories and facilities of the former Metallurgical Complex were privatized by foreign companies which took up the opportunity of a cheap workforce, abundant natural resources in Albania, and pre-existing industrial structures. These companies significantly reduced the number of factory workers and their respective salaries while producing excessive unregulated industrial waste. Privatization brought unemployment, instability, and emigration from Albania; the largest Europe had seen. Despite the privatizations, the majority of the former Metallurgical Complex was abandoned. The remount factory, wire factory, furnaces, factory twelve which produced agglomerate and nickel concentrate, and the transportation system became post-industrial debris. What remains of the former “Steel of the Party” are the abandoned and deserted skeletal structures some of which have been covered by wild vegetation. Local

22 Instituti i Studimeve Marksiste-Leniniste (Institute of Marxist-Leninist Studies), *Historia e Partisë së Punës të Shqipërisë* [History of the Party of Labour of Albania] (Tirana: 8 Nëntori, 1981), 337.

23 Michael Kopsidis and Martin Ivanov, “Modern Industry in Southeast Europe 1945–2010: From Rapid Industrialization to Deindustrialization,” *Handbuch zur Geschichte Südosteuropas* (Regensburg: Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung, 2018), 43.



Figure 5.2: Milena Jovičević, *Sustainable Privatization*, festival of contemporary art *Informal Mind*, curated by MAM foundation, Metallurgical Complex of Elbasan, Albania, performed by Ana Dragić, 2014. Photo: Ranko Djanković.

authorities have not made any efforts to regenerate, restore, or protect the area. The ruination continues without interruption. *Informal Mind* did not come to disturb this ruination. Rather, the exhibition was developed together with the ruins.

The site-specific performances and installations raised awareness of how privatization and post-industrialism have affected the local communities of Elbasan. In her art piece *Sustainable Privatization* (2014), the Montenegrin artist Milena Jovicević staged a performance during which her female protagonist, performed by Ana Dragić, was “selling” bricks she had gathered in the factory (fig. 5.2). The artist conceived the performance when, during her fieldwork at the industrial area, she saw locals selling bricks they had gathered from the ruins of the industrial plant. While the performer was “selling” the bricks, in the background, the employees of her fictional company ABBE (Art Brick Black Eagle) were extracting the last remaining bricks from the factory ruins. The bricks were then packed in luxurious blue boxes and “sold” to visitors. The “seller” was standing behind a counter full of blue boxes with bricks, trying to persuade visitors to “buy” a brick for 100 euros. This was just a performative monetary exchange, not a real one. However, in describing the inspiration behind this site-specific performance, the artist observes:

It's a perfect illustration of our relations to the past. We can destroy and steal everything that is "state property" from the past without any responsibility and state can also destroy anything from the past without any responsibility. Is our existence nowadays all about stealing and cheating?<sup>24</sup>

The above statement highlights both how the state has neglected former industrial places, as well as the fact that private companies have taken away what once belonged to the public. More than an aesthetic metaphor, the bricks as material remnants of the old factory enabled the performance to become a re-enactment of privatization inviting visitors to see the stages of the commodification process. Private companies co-opt what once belonged to the state, and then, sell what were once public goods under new vocabularies of development and sustainability.

Industrial remnants are also incorporated into the site-specific installation *Hotel* (2014) by Albanian artist Alban Muja. The semi-lit letters standing atop a ruined industrial building formed an allegorical metaphor that found resonance when placed within the context of the site. While the first part of the word *Hot-el* remained lit, a nod to when the industrial complex was still active, the last two letters were kept dark as a reference to the very dark years of transition and the failed promises of the much-desired capitalism. Situating this artwork in what was once, according to the artist, the "hot-spot of the Albanian economy" brought connotations of the fate of the industrial site, and also, the sudden switch from one regime to another.<sup>25</sup> The installation created an affective atmosphere. When viewing the installation, we could tell that there was no actual hotel there. Visitors could see and smell the debris of destruction. They could touch the old bricks and remaining scrap metals. Debris was materializing before their eyes, ears, hands, and noses. Yet the installation invited viewers to think on the reasons why these letters were situated above a derelict industrial structure. The letters were a provocation to think about the future and present of the industrial site, and that of Albania's socialist past, its transition to neoliberal democracy as well as its present political and economic state. As such, considering the rapid changes that have occurred in the urban fabric and landscape of Albania's cities in the name of progress and development, the word "hotel"

24 Milena Jovicević, "Sustainable Privatization," artist statement, accessed March 17, 2023, [www.milenajovicevic.com/sustainable-privatization-ck5f](http://www.milenajovicevic.com/sustainable-privatization-ck5f).

25 Alban Muja, "Artist Statement," accessed March 17, 2023, <http://albanmuja.com/portfolio/hotel/>.

standing on the ruins of the past could also be a reference to housing or other regeneration projects that have wiped away former public spaces. In particular, spaces that carried marks of the socialist past have now been replaced with private luxurious apartments.

Alban Hajdinaj's site-specific installation, *A New Life Blossoms in the Ruins* (2014), followed a similar engagement with the Metallurgical Complex. The phrase was taken from drafts written by Qemal Stafa (1920–42), a significant founding member of the socialist party and youth leader who was born in Elbasan.<sup>26</sup> Written in big letters placed on the ruins of the former factory, the phrase was a plea for re-activating hope in the present reality as well as re-thinking past narratives of mass utopias.

In the book, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant questions the ways that subjects navigate the chaos of economic upheaval and uncertainty, while “moving through life seeking a rest from the feedback loop of trauma and compensation that their histories seemed to dictate.”<sup>27</sup> Berlant proposes an understanding of the present as a mediated affect, defining cruel optimism as an “attachment to compromised conditions of possibility.”<sup>28</sup> This means that we attach to harmful imaginaries of a good life that are no longer possible and sustainable. Berlant argues that perceiving the present as mediated affect allows us to better comprehend the conditions of the crisis we live in today. Affect is proposed as a strategy to diagnose and understand a present that is not working. Accordingly, affect is situated in the structures and the practices of everyday life, and as such, shaped collectively. Berlant writes that “affective atmospheres are shaped, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves.”<sup>29</sup> The affective appears as the crucial element that bonds the individuated and the social experience, the personal and the broader history, the past and present social realities as tangible realities.

*Informal Mind* was an artistic event that lasted a few days. However, the exhibition allowed the post-industrial ruined space to turn into a “meeting” point in which Albania's past and present political and social realities were put into affective temporal juxtaposition. In particular, the industrial debris that was incorporated in Hajdinaj's, Jovicević's, and Muja's site-specific

26 Written in 1935 when Qemal Stafa was fifteen years old, the phrase reads: “the old is collapsing, seasons are changing; a new life blossoms in the ruins” (“E vjetra shembet, kohët po ndryshojnë; një jetë e re po lulëzon gërmadhash”).

27 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 18.

28 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 24.

29 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 15.



installations resulted in an affective incentive to face the failed promises for a prosperous future. These were not actualized, not during Albania's socialist past that now stands abandoned in ruins, and not during its neoliberal present that has brought forward a new set of social struggles.<sup>30</sup>

## The Perplexed Temporalities of Industrial Ruins

*Informal Mind* offered visibility to the Metallurgical Complex as more artists engaged with its history and industrial material culture, envisioning different futures by repurposing the old facilities. In some cases, this materiality of industrial culture escaped the local specificity of the post-industrial site and its local audiences. A recent example would be the sculptural video installation, *Maybe the Cosmos Is Not So Extraordinary* by Albanian artist Driant Zeneli, presented at the Albanian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2019. In this two-channel videowork, industrial ruins were used as a platform to juxtapose the past with the future. The artwork was a continuation of Zeneli's previous video installation, *Beneath a Surface There Is Just Another Surface* (2015), which contrasts the failed utopias of the socialist system with the unfulfilled desires and futile dreams of its main protagonist, Mario, who wishes to fly into outer space. In a similar vein, *Maybe the Cosmos Is Not So*

30 The current precarity is the direct outcome of the 1990s, during which many people sold their newly privatized houses to pyramid firms. According to the Albanian scholar Smoki Musaraj, this practice was supported by formal practices (post-socialist free-market reforms) and informal networks (remittance sent by Albanian emigrants to their extended families in Albania). When the pyramid scheme collapsed, almost all households lost properties and assets in investments. This caused inflation, unemployment, and a general state of chaos and crisis. The economy has slowly recovered, but Albania remains one of the poorest countries in Europe. See Smoki Musaraj, *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). At the same time, corruption, a constant phenomenon within post-socialist Albanian society, has perpetuated social inequalities with unfair redistribution of resources and unequal access to opportunities. See Blendi Kajsiu, *A Discourse Analysis of Corruption: Instituting Neoliberalism against Corruption in Albania, 1998–2005* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). Left-wing, socialist, and Marxist ideologies that fuelled movements in the Western world were ostracized in post-socialist Albania, leading to an impeding of any social movements that could potentially transform social struggles into a collective demand. Social struggles remain more intense for women, LGBT people, and minority groups such as Roma populations. See Enkelejda Sula-Raxhimi, "Heterotopias of Displacement: The Production of Space in Postsocialist Albania," in *Remitting, Restoring and Building Contemporary Albania*, ed. Nataša Gregorič Bon and Smoki Musaraj (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 187–209; Elmira Danaj, "I Am Not a Feminist But...": Women's Activism in Post-1991 Albania," *Gender, Place and Culture* 25, no. 7 (June 2018): 994–1009.

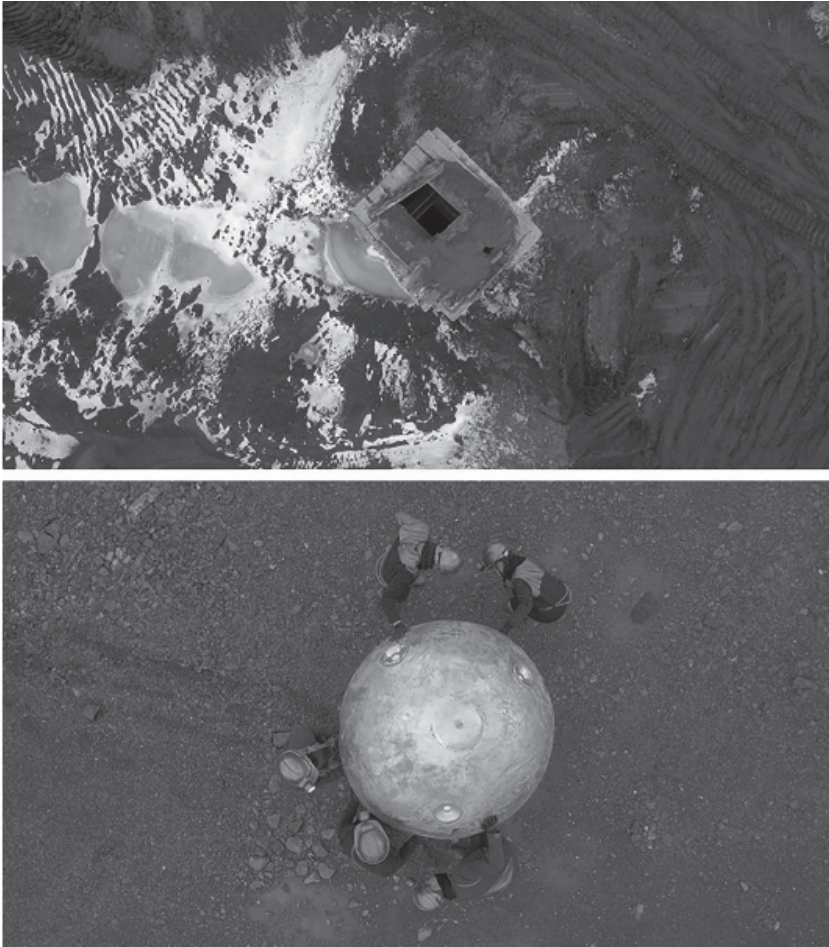


Figure 5.3: Driant Zeneli, *Maybe the Cosmos Is Not So Extraordinary*, two-channel video installation, 10 min. 19 sec., 2019. Courtesy of Foundation In Between Art and Film.

*Extraordinary* is another attempt to reflect on the notion of utopia. The artwork borrows its title from a sentence found in the science fiction novel *On the Way to Epsilon Eridani* (1983), by Albanian physicist and writer Arion Hysenbegas. Written during the final years before the collapse of the socialist regime in Albania, the book follows the adventures of a spaceship and its cosmonauts in outer space. The journey was an allegory for all the imaginary and actual travels which were impossible for Albanians at that time.

*Maybe the Cosmos Is Not So Extraordinary* (fig. 5.3) takes the form of a story which merges science fiction with Albania's present reality. The artist explains that the inspiration to create this artwork was a slag heap he had

once found at the Metallurgical Complex of Elbasan when making the video *Beneath a Surface There Is Just Another Surface* (2015). He then consulted a geologist who explained that the slag consisted of chrome, a metal extracted from the mines of the mountains of Bulqizë.<sup>31</sup> The videowork follows a group of five teenagers as they wander the mines of Bulqizë, a northern Albanian town that was once an industrial centre of ferro-chrome production. Zeneli met the group of teenagers during his research trip to the mine and decided to make them the protagonists of his two-channel video. In the videos, the teenagers are dressed in workers' uniforms and wear helmets with torches, looking like young miners. Although this might seem like a fictional scene, child labour in Albania is still a social reality with many children working in chromium mines.<sup>32</sup> In Zeneli's videowork, the young miners excavate the material remnants of the old factory, touching, sensing, and exploring the industrial ruins. They walk in the mine's tunnels. As they wander throughout the site, they come across a big silver spherical object. It is supposed to be a cosmic sphere that has landed within the factory. The industrial space has transformed into a dream-like setting. Historic time has ceased to exist in the film. Or perhaps it still exists, but it is impossible to define *when* the scene takes place. The cosmic sphere has united all temporalities. It is unclear whether the protagonists have travelled to the past, bringing a warning of the future fate of the industrial site; or whether they have been transported from the future to save the present.

For Zeneli, the industrial ruins become a metaphor to investigate the relationship between emancipation and failure, between the past and possible utopias, including both utopias of the past and potential utopic imaginaries in the present. Industrial heritage—as opposed to ancient ruins, memorials, or sites whose narrative is already predefined—can become an active mode for negotiating the process of decay. Tim Edensor argues that the temporalities of ruined factories “conjure up various histories, evoke a range of memories, signify obsolescent fashions and products, bear the imprint of the timed schedules of yesteryear, and testify to the natural temporalities imposed by decay and the ecological life cycles.”<sup>33</sup> It occurs then that ruination of this kind brings an “out-of-placeness” that remains present, although the

31 Artist's interview “The Venice Questionnaire: Driant Zeneli,” *ArtReview*, April 29, 2019, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://artreview.com/2019-venice-questionnaire-driant-zeneli-albania/>.

32 A recent UNICEF report drew attention to the many children scavenging chromium, estimating that up to 200 children are exploited in the energy sector, mostly in the mines of Bulqizë. Christopher Cuninghame and Veronika Duci, *Albania Child Notice 2021*, UNICEF, May 2022, 99.

33 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetic and Materiality* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 125.

industrial site is non-functioning and non-productive. There is always a specific history or event connected to the industrial ruination, but it is one that is translated and referenced according to the needs and problems of the present, a present which continues to see in these states of ruination all that could easily turn into debris and decay once again. It is exactly this affective quality, and the merging of temporalities and histories, that allows artists to engage with industrial heritage in negotiating not only the process of decay, but also, its political, social, economic, and cultural outlets in the present.

## Conclusion

Their socialism was characterized by the triumph of freedom and justice; mine by the failure. Their socialism would be brought about by the right people, with the right motives, under the right circumstances, with the right combination of theory and practice. There was only one thing to do about mine: forget it.<sup>34</sup>

The above passage in Lea Ypi's philosophical memoir of growing up in the socialist period of Albania reflects the broader attitude that was followed in the first decades after socialism: forget the past. As Albania was making the leap of transition to the new *status quo*, collective amnesia was the way forward. New narratives and ways of living had to be invented to set right the contradictory, painful, unspoken, and in many ways, unexpected experiences of the transition to neoliberal democracy. This newly built reality could only be sustained by a programmatic erasure of that past, by sealing it off, or vilifying it without analysis.

Reclaiming industrial heritage—both the actual sites and the community knowledge and memory inscribed in them—is more than simply processing or coming to terms with a difficult past by collectively conjuring its trauma. The material reality of industrial ruinations can provide new grounds for negotiating the conditions that follow the march towards actualizing the promises of neoliberal democracy. This promised prosperous future has not reached Albania yet, despite the new bright colours painted over the old brutalist block of flats, and despite the luxurious tower apartments which have replaced the buildings of another unwanted time.

The critical views that examine this present reality inevitably come from a younger generation, or from what Marianne Hirsh calls the location

34 Lea Ypi, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (London: Allen Lane Penguin Books, 2021), 307.

of postmemory. The prefix *post* here signals not an end of an era or a period, but more interestingly, a “belatedness.” Postmemory is the particular “moment of looking backward rather than ahead and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms.”<sup>35</sup> This should not be confused with a nostalgic reading of the past. On the contrary, it is about recuperating the “after-effects of trauma” through affective responses of later generations.<sup>36</sup> These responses work with what remains in the cracks left by battles, both physical and conceptual, as well as past and present. In this case, the affective knowledge that stems from within the cracks of history comes to speak of an inevitable inheritance of rupture and discontinuity that exists in the post-socialist time and space.

The art practices analysed in this chapter demonstrate that the socialist past remains unresolved. Yet, at the same time, the younger generation seeks to resolve a new set of social struggles, namely, the precarity and uncertainty that came after socialism. In this process, industrial heritage can contribute to keep open the possibilities that emerge within and through affective encounters between the past and the present, between the present and the future. More crucially, affective realization is accepting the very differences that exist within manifestations of collective memory, even differences in the ways in which historic events were perceived and lived in a common time/space. As Svetlana Boym argues, “collective memory can be seen as a playground, not a graveyard of multiple individual recollections.”<sup>37</sup> In this playground, memory becomes the medium for inaugurating a radically uncertain and fragile future, not a restoration of the past.

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35 Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 103–28, 106.

36 Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 106.

37 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 54.

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## About the Author

**Dimitra Gkitsa** is a researcher and cultural practitioner working on the intersection of memory studies, contemporary art, and post-socialist visual cultures. Holding a PhD in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths University of London, from 2021 to 2023 she was a research fellow in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, at UCL. She is currently a lecturer in curating and cultural leadership at the University of Southampton.





# Section Three

Cinematic and Photographic Memories



## 6. Industrial Ruins, Malaise, and Ambivalent Nostalgia

Reflections on the Post-socialist Condition in Contemporary Balkan Cinemas

Ana Grgić

### Abstract

Pervading images of de-industrialization processes and post-industrialism in Balkan cinemas over the last decade coincide with the harsh realities of the “post-socialist condition.” I explore how contemporary Balkan cinemas address these issues through an analysis of *Sînt o babă comunistă / I Am an Old Communist Hag* (2013, Romania, dir. Stere Gulea), *Rekvijem za gospođu J. / Requiem for Mrs. J.* (2017, Serbia, dir. Bojan Vuletić), and *Ti imaš noć / You Have the Night* (2018, Montenegro and Serbia, dir. Ivan Salatić). Questioning the precariousness of post-socialism, these films engage in acts of “ambivalent nostalgia” (Boym 2001) through remembrances of solidarity, collective work, and industrial productivity. Representations of dilapidated and vanishing industrial spaces echo “ruinophilia” (Boym 2011), and serve as affective remainders and reminders of socialist-era values.

**Keywords:** Balkan cinemas; post-socialism; post-industrialism; nostalgia; ruinophilia; socialism

“Ruin” literally means “collapse”—but actually, ruins are more about  
remainders and reminders.

– Svetlana Boym<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research for this chapter was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitization, CNCS UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-0141, within PNCDI III. Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 43.

An old man wanders through streets devoid of people, the echo of his voice resounding against the bleak austerity of apartment blocks and into the emptiness of the dark night. In the Montenegrin film *You Have the Night* (2018, dir. Ivan Salatić), the post-socialist transition, the effects of the global financial crisis and enduring socio-economic issues, give way to haunting images of industrial ruins and natural landscapes empty of human presence. Meanwhile, the “remainders” and “reminders” of Yugoslavian-era socialist ideals and loss of identity following the dissolution of former Yugoslavia linger in the atmosphere throughout the film.

The social disintegration, familial and economic crisis experienced by post-socialist societies represented in contemporary Balkan and Eastern European cinemas, is often interpreted by film scholars and critics as a consequence of the transition from state to market economy, processes of privatization, economic emigration, poor governance, and corruption. After the collapse of state socialism, the countries of the former socialist bloc experienced dramatic changes of “forced” de-industrialization in an extremely condensed time–space continuum, in addition to the loss of socialist values and identity, as well as socio-economic challenges of the transition period. In several films from the Balkan countries, the once thriving industrial cities of the socialist era such as Bor (Serbia), Veles (North Macedonia), Elbasan (Albania) or Călărași (Romania) appear in decline and abandonment. In *Tilva Roš* (2010, Serbia, dir. Nikola Lezaić), de-industrialization as a consequence of privatization serves as a ghostly backdrop to coming-of-age stories and representations of urban subcultures of the younger generation. Likewise, set in the present-day dilapidated mining town of Bor in eastern Serbia, the film *Beli beli svet / White White World* (2010, Serbia, dir. Oleg Novković) features the moral decay of dysfunctional families and society. These films reflect the post-socialist de-industrialization process which entailed the privatization of state enterprises, the closing or scaling down of heavy industries that had featured prominently in the socialist imaginary, and the appearance of light, less highly regarded, much more scattered plants and factories.

Elsewhere in Balkan and Eastern European cinema, the failed industrial project ushers in poverty, social issues, and the dissolution of the family. This can be seen in films such as the North Macedonian *Jas sum od Titov Veles / I am from Titov Veles* (2007, dir. Teona Strugar Mitevska), which tells the story of three sisters struggling to survive in a town polluted by a lead factory from the socialist times. Or the Romanian drama *Maria* (2003, dir. Călin Peter Netzer), based on a real story, in which a mother of seven is forced into prostitution to support her family financially when her abusive husband’s

factory goes bankrupt. In an extremely evocative image highlighting the disparities between industrial prosperity and post-industrial poverty, the pregnant mother and her children are depicted in a green field against a background of looming factory towers on the outskirts of Bucharest. In *Tirana Year Zero* (2001, dir. Fatmir Koçi), the main protagonist Niku drives across the devastated landscape of post-socialist Albania (at the time also affected by the collapse of the pyramid-investment schemes), revealing the run-down concrete buildings and factories, and a poverty-stricken society, in which German tourists come to purchase the remaining vestiges of its socialist system—the concrete bunkers erected by the dictator Enver Hoxha. We could list many more such films.

The early years of the post-socialist period witnessed films marked by a strong anti-communist sentiment in Romania, while at the same time, the thematic concerns of cinemas in the countries of the former Yugoslavia sought to build a distinct national identity based on ethno-nationalism or dealt with the immediate effects of the war. Meanwhile, the last decade has seen a turn to cinematic narratives and aesthetics which increasingly deal with the socialist past in more nuanced and ambivalent ways, and which adopt more critical perspectives of the new socio-economic order imposed by neoliberal capitalism. Ewa Mazierska argues that contemporary Eastern European cinema has documented and represented institutional violence resulting from de-industrialization, as well as the struggle for survival, lack of opportunities, and bodily self-exploitation with the societal shift to neoliberal capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Mazierska notes how the narratives and aesthetics of Eastern European cinema are politicized because the depictions of work and workers resonate with “deeper and more pervading” feelings of alienation in the neoliberal age.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I focus closely on three Balkan films, *Sînt o babă comunistă / I Am an Old Communist Hag* (2013, Romania, dir. Stere Gulea), *Rekvijem za gospođu J. / Requiem for Mrs. J.* (2017, Serbia, dir. Bojan Vuletić), and *Ti imaš noć / You Have the Night*, which depict different stages of the post-industrial period, and can be read within the wider context of contemporary global societies and cultures troubled by economic migration, precarity, and nostalgia for lost community. All three films are part of global narratives

2 Ewa Mazierska, “Polish Postcommunist Cinema and the Neoliberal Order,” *Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication*, no. 20 (2012): 53–63, 55.

3 Ewa Mazierska, ed., *Work in Cinema: Labor and the Human Condition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 11.

and aesthetics dealing with post-industrial themes.<sup>4</sup> However, the representations of ruined and abandoned industrial spaces, and allusions to industrial production and economic models in present-day Balkans and Eastern Europe become inevitably associated with latent memories of the productivity and financial stability of socialist times.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the image of a functioning and productive industry was a powerful symbol of the socialist project, and representations of “exemplary workers” were a part of the enterprise to increase industrial production in state socialist countries and reinforce the ideals of collectivism and work.<sup>6</sup>

For this reason, the pervading images of de-industrialization processes and post-industrialism as they are pictured in Balkan cinemas in the last decade can be read as a continuing consequence and side-effect of the “post-socialist condition.” I employ this notion similar to Lars Kristensen, who uses the term “post-communist condition,” arguing that it should not merely be understood as a concept which designates a temporal or a geographical designation resulting from the collapse of the socialist bloc in Europe, or its economic or socio-political analysis to understanding it as a culture in transition.<sup>7</sup> Rather, it should be seen as a “cross-cultural and global” phenomenon, and therefore, considered in “its plurality and in its multifaceted manifestations.”<sup>8</sup> To this end, the recurring themes of precarity, unemployment, economic migration, and disintegration of community and family relationships against the post-industrial landscape in Balkan and Eastern European cinemas reflect broader trends of economic disparities and marginality across the world. Further, for Zoran Samardžija, the “post-communist malaise” experienced by post-socialist societies constitutes a crisis of identity and the betrayal of socialist values and ideals,<sup>9</sup> while

4 For example, though Greece, which is considered both a Balkan and a European country, was not part of the socialist bloc, the contemporary film *Attenberg* (2010, dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari) foregrounds the Greek economic and identity crisis in neoliberal times, by setting the story in the slowly decaying space of the former industrial town of Aspra Spitia. Here, the ghostly industrial ruin becomes a contested political space, which represents the failure of the imported European industrial promise.

5 The mass industrialization of most Balkan countries took place at the end of the Second World War, when the new socialist governments not only engaged in post-war rebuilding, but sought to rapidly modernize the economy, the production, and the workforce.

6 Andrea Matošević, “‘This Is a Matter of Numbers, Not of Heart’: Re-signing Shock Labor in 1970s Film,” *Narodna Umjetnost* 50, no. 1 (2013): 12–38.

7 Lars Kristensen, ed., *Postcommunist Film—Russia, Eastern Europe and World Culture: Moving Images of Postcommunism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012).

8 Kristensen, *Postcommunist Film*.

9 Zoran Samardžija, *Post-Communist Malaise: Cinematic Responses to European Integration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 1–17. Postcolonial studies have explored

Balkan and Eastern European arthouse cinema forge a unique discourse of political modernism which tends to critique the “neoliberal integration of Europe in the post-communist era.”<sup>10</sup> Other scholars have noted that the progressive integration of Balkan nations into the European Union, a development otherwise known as Europeanization, should be seen as a form of neo-colonial economic subjugation which has resulted in a double-edged process, “at once global integration and local social disintegration.”<sup>11</sup> This is evident in the films, as the protagonists travel across borders searching for employment, have access to globalized-era goods and commodities, and yet, their lives are marked by dysfunctional relationships, economic hardships, and lack of community.

In addition to coming to terms with the “post-socialist condition,” the three Balkan films here under analysis, expose the contradictions and the uneven social and economic development of socialist societies’ transition to capitalist neoliberalism. In *I Am an old Communist Hag*, the protagonist recalls the productivity and collective work of Romania’s socialist past through forms of ambivalent or reflective nostalgia in her present-day environment of economic uncertainty. In *Requiem for Mrs. J.* and *You Have the Night*, the closure and abandonment of factories and industries once thriving in the former Yugoslavia, lead to the economic and existential despair of characters who are unable to function in the post-socialist era due to unemployment and lack of familiar bearings. Yet all three films offer complex responses to the Romanian, Serbian, and Montenegrin realities and reflect on the socialist project through remembering imaginaries of solidarity, collective

the historical construction of dominant (Western) discourses surrounding the perceived inequalities and inferiority of Balkan cultures and space. See Maria Todorova, “The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 453–82 and *Imagining the Balkans*, updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1997]). For instance, Nataša Kovačević frames the “post-communist condition” from a postcolonial perspective to account for the feelings of cultural inferiority experienced by Balkan and Eastern European societies during post-socialism. She highlights that communism served “as a line of flight for Eastern Europeans from not only the power grids of Western nations, but also the stigma of economic and cultural inferiority, escape from the logic of capital and the logic of being the ‘other.’” Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2008), 16–17.

<sup>10</sup> Samardžija, *Post-Communist Malaise*, 5. Furthermore, in his readings of arthouse cinema from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Samardžija finds that it “tends to imagine post-communist identity as liminal,” precisely because the post-communist identity is indeterminate with no subsequent stage of development beyond the promise to become European and enter the marketplace. Samardžija, *Post-Communist Malaise*, 7–8.

<sup>11</sup> Dušan Bjelić, “Introduction: Balkan Transnationalism at the Time of Neoliberal Catastrophe,” *Interventions* 20, no. 6 (2018): 751–58, 752.

work, and industrial productivity, not as a nostalgic response to an idealized past, but rather as a way of questioning and condemning the precarity of the present condition. These acts of remembering constitute more of what Svetlana Boym called “reflective nostalgia” due to the ambivalences of this form of remembering, which cohabits different times and presents multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Boym describes different acts of nostalgia in post-socialist societies that she classifies as: “restorative nostalgia,” which claims absolute truth and is linked to nationalisms and myth fabrication, and “reflective nostalgia,” which privileges “shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space.”<sup>13</sup> According to Boym: “Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. [...] Restorative nostalgia is at the core of recent national and religious revivals; it knows two main plots—the return to origins and the conspiracy.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, she argues that “Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols. At best, reflective nostalgia can present an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholias.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in my reading of the films’ aesthetic strategies, I also make recourse to Svetlana Boym’s concept of modern “ruinophilia,” the appreciation of the ruins in the twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup> Socialist-era buildings, monuments, and objects linger within the real spaces of the former socialist bloc countries; some have been transformed into museums or new sites where socialist-era memorabilia become part of post-socialist tourism and practices of socialist nostalgia.<sup>17</sup> The three films, however, do not engage in acts of socialist nostalgia nor figure as sites for the post-socialist tourist gaze for consumption, which fetishizes and idealizes the bygone socialist past. Here, instead, the images of run-down factories or industrial ruins not only evoke an intellectual and sensual fascination with the vanishing materiality of

12 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

13 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

14 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 16.

15 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xviii.

16 Svetlana Boym, “Ruinophilia: Appreciation of Ruins” (2011), *Atlas of Transformation*, accessed April 12, 2023, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/r/ruinophilia/ruinophilia-appreciation-of-ruins-svetlana-boym.html>.

17 Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the term *Ostalgie* has been used to describe a set of recurring practices in the former East Germany, “a nostalgia for the East,” which involves “the revival, reproduction and commercialization of GDR products” and “museumification of GDR life.” Daphne Berdahl, “‘(N)ostalgie’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,” *Ethnos* 64, no. 2 (1999): 192–211, 193.



these spaces (through the carefully constructed *mise-en-scène* which guides and directs the spectator's gaze), but moreover serve as a "remainder" and a "reminder" of socialist-era productivity and collectivism, in order to critique the present. For this reason, building on Boym's notion of "ruinophilia," which entails a contemporary ruin-gaze conceding the disharmony and the coexistence of human, historical, and natural temporalities, I argue that the filmic representations of characters interacting with the post-industrial and post-socialist spaces furnish poignant examples of the "post-socialist industrial ruin" in recent Balkan cinema.

### Economic Uncertainty and Existential Malaise

Within the context of successive stages of the de-industrialization process and privatization, which visibly affect individuals, families, and entire communities as factories close down and industrial production shifts elsewhere, *I Am an Old Communist Hag*, *Requiem for Mrs. J.*, and *You Have the Night* engage with issues of precarity, unemployment, and economic migration in contemporary times. These films relate the individual experiences of female protagonists as they navigate their social environments and family relationships. The narratives offer a view of the three women, Emilia, Jelena, and Sanja, and their family's lives as affected by the economic uncertainty of post-socialist times. The post-industrial and de-industrialized landscapes appear as backdrops to the slow and painful unravelling of their ensuing malaise. These depictions of individual and societal malaise constitute part of the cinematic critique of the neoliberal integration in Europe and the free market ideology as argued by Samardzija in his analysis of Eastern European art films. Emilia in *I Am an Old Communist Hag* struggles to cope and fails to understand the reality of post-socialist Romania, appearing "out of touch with the times" in the eyes of her family. Yet, she naively attempts to intervene and correct the present condition. Jelena in *Requiem for Mrs. J.* has already abandoned herself to despair as she wanders hopelessly through her environment as a living zombie. The protagonist of *You Have the Night*, Sanja, belongs to the younger generation, but she is also destined to wander in silence, albeit through other spaces, in search of work, to join other economic migrants from the Balkan region and beyond.

Contemporary Romanian cinema has dealt with the effects of the post-socialist transition, privatization of industry, and de-industrialization by focusing on micro-histories of disenfranchised and impoverished individuals. In these films, the post-industrial imaginary is usually relegated to the

background. *I Am an Old Communist Hag* follows a sixty-year-old pensioner, Emilia (Luminița Gheorghiu), who struggles to reconcile the end of the Ceaușescu regime and the ensuing transition period. The script is based on the eponymous novel written by Dan Lungu in 2007, in which the main character is a low-income pensioner living in the Romanian province, “emblematic of the category of (*n*)ostalgic citizens during the Romanian transition.”<sup>18</sup> According to Claudiu Turcuș, the film varies substantially from the novel and centres on Emilia’s “mythologized past” as a “sort of compensatory universe” to be contrasted with the realities of the transition.<sup>19</sup> The story is set in Călărași, a city in south-east Romania, which was once an important centre of heavy industry during the communist period, known for the steel mill that had 6500 employees at its height of productivity. Following the regime change, the steel works underwent a privatization process fraught with difficulties, and its ownership changed hands several times until its bankruptcy in 2005. Jigoria-Oprea and Popa note that de-industrialization in post-socialist countries occurred later than in Western Europe and was more dramatic due to the uncompetitive local industry and an inadequate legislation structure which would regulate privatization.<sup>20</sup> Following the privatization of industrial enterprises in Romania, the industrial sector continued restructuring and remained in decline, which often led to the closure of factories.<sup>21</sup> Given this socio-economic context, the representation of Emilia’s story against the setting of a closed factory serves as a traumatic reminder of the country’s transition to neoliberal market ideology, which left its industrial sector to the mercy of unscrupulous businessmen.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the film also touches upon the issue of economic migration, which is omnipresent in post-socialist societies. Emilia’s pregnant daughter Alice, who had emigrated abroad for work, returns home with her American boyfriend Alan, as a direct consequence of the global financial crisis. The couple are currently unemployed and the bank is threatening foreclosure on their house in the USA. Ironically, their return as emigrants from the

18 Claudiu Turcuș, “Recycling and Confronting Ostalgie under the Romanian Transition: I’m an Old Communist Hag an Unfaithful Adaptation,” *Ekphrasis* 10, no. 2 (2013): 71–88, 65–66.

19 Turcuș, “Recycling and Confronting Ostalgie,” 65–66.

20 Liviu Jigoria-Oprea and Nicolae Popa, “Industrial Brownfields,” *Urban Studies* 54, no. 12 (2017): 2719–38, 2720.

21 Jigoria-Oprea and Popa, “Industrial Brownfields,” 2720–21.

22 This theme is explored most vividly in Tudor Giurgiu’s comedy *Despre oameni și melci / Of Snails and Men* (2012), in which a state-owned car factory employing almost all of the men in a small Romanian town is undergoing privatization in the early 1990s. When the car factory is about to be sold to French investors for pennies, in order to save their jobs and keep the factory running, the workers decide to sell their sperm to an American company.

prosperous West is reversed in Romania: the parents must sell their socialist-era apartment to help their daughter financially. By shifting the story to the aftermath of the financial crisis (around 2008–9), the film depicts the late post-socialist period and accommodates “multiple perspectives on communism.”<sup>23</sup> The film also highlights the generational gap between those who lived during the communist period and the younger generation who grew up during the transition period. This is shown in the exchanges between the mother and the daughter at the dinner table which almost erupt into a political dispute, spurred by the TV news broadcast of exhumation of the former communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife. Cutting from the TV screen to a wide shot of the dinner table and the guests, Alice breaks the silence, by expressing her shock and disbelief that Ceaușescu and communism are still items of national interest. The father ironically responds that if Ceaușescu were to run for election today, he would win, while the mother Emilia recalls the communist period as one of economic prosperity and familial security. This scene serves to portray the various and polarizing perspectives on the Romanian socialist past within a single-family context in the advanced transition era.

Similarly, in *Requiem for Mrs. J.*, the mother-daughter relationship also serves as a catalyst for the plot. Here the daughter is also pregnant, which forces the mother to re-assume the role of the family protector and carer, despite the existential difficulties of the post-socialist condition. Set in present-day Belgrade, the film focuses on the existential malaise of unemployed widow Jelena or Mrs. J. (Mirjana Karanović) and her family, in a country still affected by the post-socialist transition twenty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia. In the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars (1991–99), the plight of Serbia’s weak political system and troubled economy was further exacerbated by the global financial crisis in 2008, revealing weaknesses in the country’s economic policy. The process of de-industrialization in Serbia was also affected by the wars and economic sanctions of the 1990s, leaving negative consequences for a decade.<sup>24</sup> Mass unemployment was primarily related to the crisis of the large-scale industry built under socialism, while the processes of privatization and enterprise restructuring of state-owned companies had a negative effect on the labour market.<sup>25</sup> Against this socio-

23 Turcuș, “Recycling and Confronting Ostalgie,” 73.

24 György Simon, “Development and Transition in Serbia: Economic Aspects,” *Neo-Transitional Economics, International Finance Review* 16 (2015): 53–96, 71.

25 Simon, “Development and Transition in Serbia,” 71; Ivan Stošić, Srđan Redžepagić, and Zvonko Brnjas, “Privatization, Restructuring and Unemployment: The Case of Serbia,” in *New*

economic backdrop, the narrative of *Requiem for Mrs. J.* unravels, slowly revealing the ills of a country seemingly still in transition. After losing her job and her husband, and feeling overwhelmed by existential malaise, Mrs. J. decides to commit suicide, but eventually fails at the problematic logistics of “suicide planning.” The bleakness of Mrs. J.’s condition and psychological state is underscored by the slow, brooding camera work and desaturated colours, as well as the recurring employment of wide shots in which Mrs. J. seems both lost and imprisoned within institutional buildings, factory, hospital waiting rooms, and other socialist-era offices.

We are witness to a woman’s story who fails to cope in the morally and economically devastated post-war and post-socialist transition-era Serbia. This is particularly highlighted in the scenes where the widowed and unemployed Mrs. J. wanders aimlessly from institution to institution like a zombie, accompanied by her youngest daughter Koviljka, a foulmouthed tomboy, and is forced to wait interminably with others in run-down lobbies or strikingly grey corridors. The director Bojan Vuletić explains how “The film deals with one of the painful and unavoidable issues in Eastern Europe—social transition and economic crisis. The new political and economic system is altering the old face of socialism, bringing big changes in the value system, which inevitably leads, as in this case, to total identity crisis.”<sup>26</sup> This social critique with undertones of dark humour plays with the image of the disenfranchised and purposeless character of Mrs. J. and is a broader metaphor for Serbian society, where the privatization and restructuring of state enterprises left many unemployed and struggling for survival.

Meanwhile, her oldest daughter, Ana, supports the entire family by working in a dead-end job, and considers her mother a hopeless character, evident in the scenes in which she accuses her of being unproductive and useless for the family. Like in the Romanian film, here the mother-daughter dynamic is exacerbated due to the generational gap and the difference in values. The mother grew up and lived in socialism, while the daughter is slaving away long hours for little pay in a typical warehouse chain of the capitalist era. This uneasy relationship with work and labour in the neoliberal age is also palpable in the Montenegrin film, *You Have the Night*, which becomes an emblematic portrayal of post-socialist societies struggling to offer decent life opportunities and employment to the younger generation. In one of the

*Challenges in Changing Labour Markets*, ed. Jovan Zubović and Ivana Domazet (Belgrade: Institute of Economic Sciences, 2012), 355–72, 341, 353.

<sup>26</sup> “Requiem for Mrs. J. / Rekvijem za Gospođu J.,” *European Film Awards*, 2017, accessed April 12, 2023, [https://europeanfilmawards.eu/en\\_EN/film/requiem-for-mrs-j.9330](https://europeanfilmawards.eu/en_EN/film/requiem-for-mrs-j.9330).



Figure 6.1: Sanja on the cruise ship, *You Have the Night*, dir. Ivan Salatić, 2018.

first images of the film, Sanja is framed by an unnatural greenish yellow neon light against the staircase on a cruise ship (fig. 6.1), her face impassive and covered in darkness.

Described as an “existential drama,” *You Have the Night* focuses on the existential and economic malaise of a young woman named Sanja and her family living in Bijela, a small Montenegrin town on the Adriatic coast. The story begins with the end of Sanja’s employment on a cruise ship and her return to Montenegro via Italy. The urban environment in which the action takes place resembles several port cities on the European side of the Mediterranean. There are no clear geographic indicators in the mise-en-scène to identify which city, as Sanja is framed against concrete constructions, overpasses and roads, further emphasizing the lack of perspective and horizons. She sits and eats takeaway fried prawns on the stairs. The passing time is eclipsed and indefinite. Next, we witness Sanja sleeping on the street in a corner, clutching a sport bag, and then spending some nights in a shelter with other migrants and refugees.<sup>27</sup> Her character represents a typical Balkan and Eastern European economic migrant who is forced to go abroad looking for work given the lack of opportunities at home. The political collapse of the former Yugoslavia was accompanied by a financial downfall for its smallest republic, Montenegro, which also suffered from high inflation rates, economic sanctions, international isolation, decrease in industrial output, and unemployment. The Montenegrin economy did recover after

<sup>27</sup> In these opening scenes, Sanja’s journey recalls the media images and stories of hundreds of meandering refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean Sea and on the shores of southern Italy and France in the 2010s.

the country's independence in 2006 with significant GDP growth. However, following the global financial crisis, the growth rates plunged due to the country being small, open, and very susceptible to international economic trends.<sup>28</sup> In the following decade, the country continued to face unemployment issues—affecting the youth in particular—which increased steadily between 2008 and 2014.<sup>29</sup> Aside from economic emigration, the film reflects in several ways the post-Yugoslav identity crisis and socio-political issues experienced by Montenegrin society.

Sanja's situation is slowly revealed as the narrative unfolds, and when she returns home, the story expands to the all-pervading existential and identity crisis of her family and the entire community in Bijela as they endure the effects of the ongoing post-socialist and post-Yugoslav transition.<sup>30</sup> The family is scattered and dislocated, both within the space of the frame and within their environment. Sanja works abroad and is separated from her partner back home in Bijela, while their son is living with her mother. Throughout the film, the viewer partakes in glimpses of seemingly insignificant and minor everyday actions of each family member while they struggle to survive. The precarity of their lives is shown against the setting of the closure of the local shipyard, which was once important for the economy of the town and provided a means of employment to the community.<sup>31</sup> The landscape becomes a witness to the realities of the post-socialist transition and the neoliberal age, as the predominant darkness of green, blue, and grey hues dominate the majority of the scenes, whether inside homes, in the exteriors, on the streets, in abandoned buildings, in the shipyard's surroundings, or next to the sea. Here, the case of the failed shipyard industry becomes an allegory for the

28 Milena Vučinić, "Financial Stability—Comparative Analysis: Montenegro, Serbia and the Netherlands," *Journal of Central Banking Theory and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2015): 63–93, 68.

29 Qerim Qerimi and Bruno S. Sergi, "The Nature and the Scope of the Global Economic Crisis' Impact on Employment Trends and Policies in South East Europe," *Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 4 (2017): 143–53, 149; Vučinić, "Financial Stability—Comparative Analysis," 76–77.

30 Stojiljković argues that following Sanja's return to Montenegro, the film focuses on the small coastal town and community of Bijela as a "collective character." Marko Stojiljković, "Ti imaš noć: Postoji tu nešto nepotrebno teskobno, teško i mučno," *lupiga.com*, December 5, 2018, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://lupiga.com/filmovi/ti-imas-noc-postoji-tu-nesto-nepotrebno-teskobno-tesko-i-mucno>.

31 The "Bijela Adriatic Shipyard" was the largest and most important maintenance repair shipyard dock in Montenegro from 1976 until the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. After a series of failed privatization attempts, which led to the bankruptcy of the shipyard, its dock and equipment were sold to the Turkish company Ozata Trasnaclika Sanayi ve Ticaret for 2 million euros in April 2017.

material and symbolic disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, as well as its collective and socialist-managed economy.

By foregrounding the stories of the female protagonists, Sanja, Mrs. J. and her daughter, Emilia and her daughter, and their ensuing malaise, the Montenegrin, Serbian, and Romanian films here under analysis become part of the cinematic critique of neoliberal integration and free market ideology in Europe. Due to the volatile economic system and the instability of the neoliberal markets, the closure of socialist-era factories, and the privatization following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, unable to make a living in her town, Sanja emigrates for work, while at home, her family is disintegrated. Mrs. J.'s daughter Ana, on the other hand, has few opportunities, and is depicted slaving away for little money in a neoliberal-era market chain warehouse, while the family resides together in a small worn-down socialist-era apartment. Emilia's daughter Alice, however, is forced to return to Romania—after living in the “prosperous” West, also affected by the fluctuations of the neoliberal system and markets, which resulted in the financial crisis—and to come to terms with different perspectives of the communist past and the current post-socialist reality.

### The Post-socialist Industrial Ruin

In terms of their stylistic and formal approaches, these three films construct an aesthetic of the “post-socialist industrial ruin” in several scenes where the protagonists interact with post-industrial environments. I refer to an aesthetic of the post-socialist industrial ruin to describe images of ruins and material decay of socialist-era factories, manufacturing plants, and offices, which acquire an affective and nostalgic patina similar to that of an archaeological ruin.<sup>32</sup> Through these sites, the historical and temporal distance between the post-socialist and post-industrial present and the socialist and industrial past collapses, and the protagonists engage in a voluntary and involuntary resurgence of memories and remembrances. The remains of old factories and industries no longer have a place in the post-industrial and post-socialist economy, and they are now inhabited by various forms of flora and fauna (weeds, trees, birds, and insects), and organic matter (such as dust, debris or branches carried by the wind). As the

32 Patina is a better-known term in art history and restoration, where it designates the accumulation of living traces, which historical time and ravages of history have left upon a material object, and which John Ruskin referred to as the “golden stain of time.”

protagonists rediscover and wander through these (past) sites, new meanings and relationships with the present condition emerge. Svetlana Boym has described the contemporary obsession with ruins as “ruinophilia,” arguing that “the contemporary ruin-gaze requires an acceptance of disharmony and of the contrapuntal relationship of human, historical, and natural temporality.”<sup>33</sup> In Boym’s view, rediscovered ruins can become “sites for a new exploration and production of meanings.”<sup>34</sup>

In *Requiem for Mrs. J.*, the decaying factory which made Mrs. J. redundant after years of work is pictured as a ghastly presence, and the geometrical mise-en-scène reinforces the anxiety and malaise. In the scene where she returns to the Napredak furniture factory (ironically the name signifies “Progress”—a nod to the socialist promise of the future in the former Yugoslavia), haunting images of the abandoned machinery, empty corridors, and the visual wasteland function as a metaphor for the broader Serbian landscape and society. Returning to Boym’s notion that images of ruins become sites for exploration and the generation of new meanings, here, the once thriving furniture factory serves as a space of confrontation between Mrs. J. and her past, and towards the end of the scene, a crucial cathartic moment between her and her youngest daughter Koviljka.

The first image of the factory floor in ruins is a travelling point of view shot of Mrs. J., accompanied by the sound of pigeon wings flapping, the haunting sound of the wind howling through the emptiness of the space, and the faint creaking of industrial machinery. The camera cuts to reveal Mrs. J. holding her daughter’s hand and then the camera slowly retreats, emphasizing the feeling of anxiety. The framing and composition of the factory scene almost resembles horror-like aesthetics; Mrs. J. and her daughter appear small and alone in the vast emptiness of this industrial space filled with dusty and disused machinery and peeling paint (fig. 6.2). The sound of their footsteps echoes and the howling of the wind presages an imminent menace. The claustrophobic malaise that Mrs. J. experiences in the return to her former workplace is particularly evident in a subjective perspective of a long, musty corridor filled with pigeons. They fly away as her daughter runs, kicking up the dust of the floor from years of abandonment. The film then cuts to a mid-shot of Mrs. J. in almost complete darkness as she walks down the corridor and towards her former office. Although faint and difficult to discern, her expression is that of shock and disbelief. At the end of the scene, overwhelmed by the ghostly and ghastly absence of work and workers, Mrs.

33 Boym, “Ruinophilia.”

34 Boym, “Ruinophilia.”





Figure 6.2: Mrs. J. and her daughter Koviljka roam through an abandoned factory, *Requiem for Mrs. J.*, dir. Bojan Vuletić, 2017.

J. exits the factory, leaving her daughter Koviljka behind to call out for her mother in desperation. When Koviljka finally finds Mrs. J. seated outside the factory in abandonment, she slaps her as though she wants to wake her mother from this dormant stupor or better, the post-socialist slumber.

The image of such passive, purposeless people also appears in *You Have the Night*, alongside de-industrialized visions of Montenegrin spaces, landscapes, buildings, and boats in ruins. When it rains, the water trickles in and leaks. The protagonists are both framed by and lost within the environment. Throughout the film the sound is completely diegetic, adding a greater layer of realism. The style of framing and composition encapsulates and restricts the bodies of the protagonists within the space of the town and its surroundings, rarely revealing the skyline or the horizon. Overall, the cinematography tends to be dark, subdued, and cold, while the colour palette draws on shades of green, blue, and grey, while the characters are often in darkness or shadow. This suggests the lack of prospective for Sanja and her family and the entire community in Bijela. Even when the sea appears on screen, it is either dark, ominous, and tumultuous, bringing a storm and exuding a feeling of unsettledness and tragedy, or alternatively, it is flat and constricting as in a scene when Sanja's ex-partner goes underwater fishing. The geographical and natural position of the town on the Adriatic coast, which once contributed to the growth and economic stability of its community thanks to the shipyard, is likewise a symbolic backdrop. One would expect to see the vibrancy of summer colours and sounds, and yet, viewers are deliberately confronted with the other side of an idyllic

Adriatic seascape: the bleak, oppressing, and grey colour palette of the winter months. The overall atmosphere of disquiet and malaise comes from news announcements about the bankruptcy of the shipyard and its closure. A popular summer song, which lingers on the radio while Sanja washes dishes in a restaurant kitchen, further reinforces the irony and adds a layer of faint nostalgia for past moments.

### **Ambivalent Nostalgia and the Loss of Community**

The three films under discussion perform a type of “reflective nostalgia” because they allow the audience to reflect upon the social memory which consists of collective frameworks that mark, but do not define, individual memory of the film’s protagonists. For instance, in *I Am an Old Communist Hag*, the protagonist Emilia travels back to the past through her recollections of a typical work scene when she used to work in the factory. In another scene, her futile attempt to help her daughter financially consists of arranging a reunion with her former co-workers, where she tries to appeal to their feelings of solidarity in order to restart production at the old factory through a workers-led initiative. In a similar manner, when the former shipyard worker, now an old man, Momo, falls asleep in *You Have the Night*, the inauguration of the Bijela shipyard, another collective endeavour of the socialist era, replays as vivid images in his dreams. Through narrative devices, such as the use of flashback (*I Am an Old Communist Hag*) and archival footage (*You Have the Night*), the characters engage in acts of reflective nostalgia, since such representations constitute fragmented, incomplete, and subjective memories of the past, and exist in opposition to state-organized, commemorative events of national symbols and myths.

Asked by a young neighbour for her Communist Party card as one of the few who kept it following the fall of the regime, Emilia goes to the old factory where she worked during the communist period, and where a documentary entitled *Life in Communism* is in production. Later, dressed in a typical Romanian folk costume, she makes an appearance in the documentary as an extra, as a remnant of the socialist-era factory’s living past. In the scene which is of particular interest here, Emilia wanders through the abandoned factory and is overcome by a stream of past memories. The ruins of the factory conserve an affective dimension of a collective socialist past as perceived by Emilia. This is achieved through the cinematography, and its warm and vibrant colour palette, which visually echoes Emilia’s



Figure 6.3: Abandoned industrial machinery covered by plastic sheets, *I Am an Old Communist Hag*, dir. Stere Gulea, 2013.

affect for the past. To further underscore this nostalgic encounter with the past, the film makes recourse to a black-and-white flashback scene accompanied by a classical music score with nostalgic overtones. The memories overflow when Emilia looks through an open window down onto the production floor. This past remembrance is subjective, the hand-held camera moves through the scene from Emilia's point of view, as she walks through the factory floor and talks with her co-workers while they are having lunch. The black-and-white memories are intercut with medium-long shots of Emilia in the present day looking down onto the production floor, while her co-workers' dialogue continues to be heard (via a sound bridge), connecting the past to the present. This recalling of the past appears as a fleeting moment of bygone happiness. As the dialogue ends, the camera lingers behind Emilia who continues to look down onto the production floor which is filled with machinery. Then, Emilia slowly exits the frame, underscored by the sounds of her footsteps disappearing, revealing the background: a blurry image of abandoned factory machines covered by translucent sheets of plastic. The camera lingers on this view and then slowly brings these industrial-era ghosts into focus (fig. 6.3). Since Emilia is no longer in the frame, this image suggests a collective reflection of contemporary Romanian society, still coming to terms with conflicted and traumatic memories of its socialist past. The plastic sheet-covered machinery emerges as sad and abandoned relics of the ideals of collectivism and productivity of Romania's socialist past. They are reimagined like post-socialist industrial ruins or museum pieces, relegated to oblivion and dusty archives.

The factory scene in which Emilia wanders through the relics of her past and youth is representative of Boym's "reflective nostalgia," as the spectators are invited to inhabit both the present and the past through Emilia's remembrances. The flashback scene indeed privileges details and not symbols, such as the views of her colleagues eating lunch or telling a joke.

In other parts of the film, Emilia's remembrances also encompass carefully constructed visions commissioned by the state: fragments of communist-era propaganda documentaries alongside fictionalized black-and-white scenes from her childhood and her adult years while working in the factory. By intercutting both Emilia's subjective memories of the past and socialist-era documentary footage, the director opens up the possibility of polyphonic and mutually co-habiting present perspectives of the socialist past. This directorial choice allows the audience to go beyond post-socialist representations and readings which tend to condemn and reject the Romanian socialist and industrial past based solely on its communist ideology, and instead accommodates and encompasses individual and subjective memories of that period, which provide more nuanced readings. The use of socialist-era documentary footage, alongside black-and-white fictional re-enactments of past moments from Emilia's life at various points in the film, allows the coexistence of the present moment and the remains of a collective dream and individual subjective memories of the socialist past with all their distortions and fragmentations. The socialist-era archival images continue to intrude into and haunt the post-socialist present, underscoring Emilia's malaise and sense of non-belonging in the new neoliberal era.

In all three films, the characters may engage in acts of ambivalent nostalgia, but more importantly, the *mise-en-scène* and the narratives expose the loss of community and solidarity in the post-socialist realities of the Romanian, Serbian, and Montenegrin societies. Particularly in *You Have the Night*, the younger generation appear disconnected from each other and lost within the surrounding environment. Pavle Levi argues how the recurrent use of "landscape frames" and the absence of people in post-Yugoslav cinemas are not only related to the consequences of the Yugoslav wars and the crimes of the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> Rather, these are also representative of the ongoing historical revisionism in the countries of the former Yugoslavia and "systematic erasure and negation of the partisan resistance, Yugoslav revolution, socialism, class struggle and the workers' state."<sup>36</sup> Seen in this

35 Pavle Levi, "Pejzaži u kadru, ljudi u odsustvu," *Peščanik.net*, March 13, 2021, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://pescanik.net/pejzazi-u-kadru-ljudi-u-odsustvu/>.

36 Levi, "Pejzaži u kadru, ljudi u odsustvu."

perspective, *You Have the Night* belongs to this corpus of post-Yugoslav films and constitutes a political critique of post-Yugoslav society's historical revisionism and traumatic erasure of socialist-era values. In fact, here, the landscape becomes a material and symbolic witness to the ongoing historical revisionism, the post-socialist malaise, and loss of values. Sanja's father lives with a rabid white dog in a makeshift cabin and an abandoned building away from the rest of society. Her brother Luka tries to repair the boat by appropriating the engines from two abandoned and disused boats in the shipyard at night. The property belongs to no one, and to those who must steal to survive. It is a society at the end of the world, at the end of history, as hinted by Momo, while he confides in Luka, the representative of the new generation: "You have the night." This phrase, also the title of the film, carries a particular meaning in the cultures of former Yugoslav countries. It refers both to a popular joke, and to a common view shared by the older and younger generations of the post-socialist period: that after the collapse of the Yugoslav socialist system, life and economic prospects only worsened. While it is overly simplistic to suggest that the film has Yugo-nostalgic overtones, it certainly gives voice and recognition to the collective spirit of socialist Yugoslavia and to the workers of the socialist-era industries via Momo's characterization and dialogues. Similarly, his present disquiet and lack of bearings in a world where he can neither work nor function with dignity are tinged with ambivalent nostalgia.

Meanwhile, in *Requiem for Mrs. J.* the characters are so over-burdened by the precarity of the present that any act of past nostalgia on the part of Mrs. J. would constitute a dream-like and fanciful departure from her existential malaise. At the start of the film, Mrs. J.'s connection to the past is primarily through her dead husband and the family portraits which figure in the sallow-coloured living room, until she embarks on the quest to obtain paperwork to prove her state-covered medical insurance. When she returns to the manufacturing plant where she used to work, instead of memories rushing to her mind (as is the case with Emilia), Mrs. J. wanders expressionless and in despair through the abandoned building and empty offices. After pausing for a moment to look at her old office covered in thick dust, and where, her daughter Koviljka plays with the telephone, she carries on and comes across an office with a couple of former colleagues.

Here, in a decrepit, socialist-era-style office, two of her former colleagues continue to work, filing papers and typing on outdated technology despite the fact that the factory no longer functions and they do not receive salaries. It is clear they are labouring in vain, emerging as tragic and absurd characters, remnants of the particular Yugoslav style of workers' self-managed



Figure 6.4: Momo wanders the empty town selling fish, *You Have the Night*, dir. Ivan Salatić, 2018.

economy.<sup>37</sup> These human figures appear as ruins of an industrious socialist past. This scene particularly highlights the contractions of the post-socialist transition for many: Mrs. J.'s former co-workers are depicted as engaging in mindless and thankless bureaucratic tasks leading nowhere, self-managing a no longer functioning manufacturing plant.

In a recurring motif of *You Have the Night*, Momo, another remainder of the socialist era, wanders the empty streets selling fish. He is dressed in light coloured clothing with a white bucket of fish, against the grey bleakness of the cement-wall buildings during the day (fig. 6.4). At night Momo is depicted against the darkness of empty apartments in socialist-era block towers, haunting the post-socialist present. This scene becomes a remnant and a reminder of a past which now seems absurd and forgotten. The last vestiges of socialist Yugoslavia, collective work, and industrial-era productivity disappear slowly into the dark endless night. The final images of the film show the small dock from the shipyard being carried away from Bijela's port, accompanied by the organ-like requiem sound of the ship's sirens.<sup>38</sup>

Similar to the Romanian film, *I Am an old Communist Hag*, the director Ivan Salatić makes recourse to archival footage of the inauguration of the shipyard from socialist-era Yugoslavia, bursting with human activity and

37 Following the split with the Soviet Union in 1948, this was a distinctive feature of the Yugoslav political and economic system known as workers' self-management, which allowed individuals (workers) to participate in Yugoslav enterprise management through the work organization in which they were divided. Each work organization was governed by a worker's council, which was responsible for electing the management board to run the enterprise.

38 The film incorporates documentary footage seamlessly, as this particular scene was filmed in a guerrilla manner while the dock was being decommissioned in 2017.

life at the height of industrial production.<sup>39</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the present condition of the town, emptied of human presence, sense of community, and solidarity. The director's choice to insert the archival footage towards the end of the film is significant and creates ambiguity. The archival footage could either represent the old man's dream as he naps in the afternoon light, or a moment of daydreaming as he closed his eyes to rest. On another discursive level, beyond the diegesis of the story, these archival images celebrating the collective work and productivity of the Bijela shipyard and its community haunt the precarity and malaise of the post-socialist existential reality, because they stand in stark contrast to the emptiness of the present-day community of Bijela, whose inhabitants wander aimlessly around town, try to make ends meet doing odd jobs, or leave to work abroad.

Yet, even if the film mourns the bleakness of the present and the lack of a better future, a persistent image of green creeps into many frames offering a glimpse of hope. The abandoned, decaying buildings, industrial ruins, walls and gardens are invaded by the wilderness and unwieldiness of nature. These images gesture towards a potential chaos, and perhaps a new order, which is not that made by humans. The present post-socialist and post-industrial condition tentatively signals the possibility of return to ecology and environmental concerns in the absence of industry, human activity, and presence. When Sanja's younger brother Luka disappears into the woods at the end of the film, the sound of the wind rustling the leaves strongly resembles the effect of the sea waves at the start. Industry and socialism are merely ruins. Nature prevails.

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### About the Author

**Ana Grgić** (PhD, University of St Andrews) is Associate Professor at Babeş-Bolyai University and Associate Editor of *Studies in World Cinema*. She is the author of *Early Cinema, Modernity and Visual Culture: The Imaginary of the Balkans* (2022) and co-editor of *Contemporary Balkan Cinema: Transnational Exchanges and Global Circuits* (2020).

## 7. From Document to Enactment

### Transindustrial Sequences of European Maritime Industries on Film (1970s–2020)

*Gabriel N. Gee*

#### Abstract

This chapter reflects on maritime industrial transformations through the lens of a series of artists' films, that capture the transindustrial mutations of European port cities from the 1970s to the present. The selected films can be seen as articulating critical narratives that interrogate the identities and developments of European maritime history and heritage. Each depicts the lived experience of individuals and communities immersed in those industrial and cultural transformations, reflecting on the changing relations between machine and body, the local and the global, and crucially giving voice to the actors and landscapes they represent.

**Keywords:** Transindustriality; document; enactment; artists' films; maritime industries; port cities

In the second half of the twentieth century, European maritime industries went through significant transformations following shifts in global economics. The introduction of standardized containers in the 1960s and 1970s radically changed the morphology of port cities. Selected container terminals located outside of the urban centres began to channel an increasing flow of goods, with major European hubs such as Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Hamburg handling the bulk of the activity. In parallel, European maritime industries have faced growing competition from new worldwide actors, particularly with shipbuilding facilities being established in East Asia in the post-war period to the detriment of European markets. On the one hand, these trends in maritime economics, which mirror global industrial

shifts more generally, have induced significant evolutions in European port cities. Historic harbour districts and quaysides faced decline in the 1970s and 1980s, before economic regeneration strategies introduced new functionalities associated with heritage, tourism, and the service industries. On the other hand, these developments accompanied a repositioning of European imaginaries, marked by a contestation of the global outreach of European nations, and the socio-economic model of modernization such processes had promoted throughout the world. I have developed the use of the term “transindustrial” as part of the research group on the *Textures and Experiences of Trans-Industriality* (TETI) to describe and engage with these transformations.<sup>1</sup> The term denotes in particular three dimensions: the survival of technologies from one historical period to another; the cohabitation of technologies associated with different historical moments within a same period;<sup>2</sup> and, the transfer of technologies from one field to another.

This chapter reflects on these changes through the lens of a series of artists’ films, that capture the transindustrial mutations of European port cities from the 1970s to the present. The films can be seen as articulating critical narratives that interrogate the identities and developments of European maritime history and heritage. Each depicts the lived experience of individuals and communities immersed in those industrial and cultural transformations, reflecting on the changing relation between machine and body, the local and the global, and crucially giving voice to the actors and landscapes they represent.

In *transindustriality*, the prefix “trans” denotes that which crosses through space or time, that goes beyond the limit contained in the name to which it applies.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the transindustrial aims to supersede—or connect—different historical forms of industriality, and to bypass the opposition between a Fordist past, and a post-industrial future. Such limits excessively stress a disappearance of former material infrastructure and production modes and the conversion to virtual networks and identities.<sup>4</sup> In the films discussed here, this transindustrial

1 See TETI website, accessed April 3, 2023, [www.tetigroup.org](http://www.tetigroup.org).

2 Interestingly this aspect can be associated with what Margaret Cohen terms “unevenness,” in describing the cohabitation of sailing and steam ships in the nineteenth century. See Margaret Cohen, “Introduction: Currents, Riptides, and Eddies: The Global Meets the Local in Technological Modernization at Sea,” in *A Cultural History of the Sea in the Age of Empire*, ed. Margaret Cohen (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1–26.

3 “trans,” *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales* (2022).

4 Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

movement is considered through both the objects of representation and their modes of representation. The documentary form opens our perspective, and the indexical function of the document plays an important role in the contemporary films. Documentary and document soon become interbred, however, with a diversity of genres informed by contemporary aesthetics beyond the cinematographic medium.<sup>5</sup> While this “fluidity between genres” is of interest in itself, this diversity is also selected for its capacity to reveal a set of “strategical” *sites* in the European port city. Namely, the promises and weight of economic modernization, the geopolitical currents and the glitches of history marked by the fall of the iron curtain, the advent of new maritime Silk Roads, and the embodied experience of people and places of these seemingly overarching transformations. Performed and political “enactments” through the filmic form, then, engage with seminal maritime-led transformations, to complete “documentation” in the navigation of an insistent modernity. This modernity is, in turn, explosive and liquid.<sup>6</sup> It is also shipwrecked in the words of Steve Mentz, carried by a doomed ambition reflected in environmental and societal collapse in which the maritime is crucially located.<sup>7</sup> It is to these relations turned viscous—thickened by oil and unfulfilled aspirations—on the borders of Europe that the transindustrial lens guides us.

Specifically, Amber Collective’s *Launch* (1973) takes us to the cradle of the industrial revolution in the north of England, at the decisive moment when global maritime economics shifted to the detriment of historical European maritime assets. Cora Piantoni’s *Politik in der Höhe* (2013) conveys the memories of collective organization in Gdańsk in the 1980s, before the end of socialism in 1989. Marie Reinert’s *Quai* (2012–14) explores the infrastructural landscape of Fos-sur-Mer near Marseille, depicting the industrial machinery connecting continents across the seas. *Total Algorithms of Partiality* (2018) by Johanna Bruckner confronts the urban fabric of the port city, in this case Hamburg, opposing the logic of abstract algorithmic patterns geared towards surplus value, to the

5 In particular, when the documentation of a historical moment or site is introduced beneath an alternate narrative-artistic purpose, unbound to specific documentary intentions, yet producing documentary evidence, serving in effect as a document.

6 Neil Brenner, *Implosion/Explosion: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014); Zygmunt Bauman, “Living in the Era of Liquid Modernity,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (2000/2001): 1–19.

7 Steve Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

empowering experience of “lived space.”<sup>8</sup> Our last stop is Athens, where in *Cargonauts – The Demo* (2015) Ana Lascari and Ilias Marmeras develop a virtual interactive visit of a section of the Piraeus port recently bought by Chinese business. Here the documentary merges with fiction, the physical embodied experience fuses with virtual extensions to chart the historical and technological layers that constitute the twenty-first-century European maritime industry.

### Documenting Shipyards’ Changing Fortune: *Launch*, Amber Films, 1973

The words “London Lion” painted on steel move from right to left, some heads can be seen above the railing; then at the stern “chemical venture London,” moving from left to right, a figure lurks in the misty scene, holding a cable as the sound of a horn pierces through fog. The next shot shows a misty riverbank, calm at the river’s edge, an indistinct large vessel is seen in the distance; followed by the sounds of metallic works over a fragment of what must more clearly be a monumental ship, cranes, a funnel, scaffolds. It is a static shot in which the viewer observes within an otherwise still image the combination of the descending line of terraced houses surmounted by a metallic pillar, leading the eye to a massive hull seen from the bow. The first shots of *Launch* surround the object of attention with mystery and awe.<sup>9</sup> Clouds keep falling over the scenes like curtains over a theatrical play; the eye never manages to embrace the stage completely as the camera confronts the magnitude of the site. Metallic panels, cables, and spikes rush into the sky, while the industrial sounds of sawing, cutting, drilling, welding alternate with eerie views of the shipyard. Men appear, followed by crowds of workers making their way in and out of the yards; fleeting portraits are taken among vast machinery; silhouettes ascend infinite staircases. *Launch* was made at Wallsend in the northeast of England, in the shipyards of Swan Hunter, then among the biggest shipbuilding companies in the United Kingdom, along with Scott-Lithgow in Glasgow, and Harland and Wolff in Belfast.<sup>10</sup>

8 Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

9 *Launch* (Amber Films, 1973), 10 min.

10 Nils Lewan, “West European Shipbuilding: An Industry in Transition from the Geographer’s Point of View,” *Geografiska Annaler, Human Geography* 55, no. 2 (1973): 143–52.

The Amber Collective was created in the late 1960s by a group of former students from Regent Street Polytechnic in London. The students had moved to the region to develop a photographic and documentary practice engaging with working-class communities.<sup>11</sup> The film is among the first produced by the group, documenting the launch of an oil tanker, *World Unicorn*.<sup>12</sup> However, while the grandeur of the shipyard looms over the scenes, at heart, the film is about the men who built that ship while living with their families by the river under the shadows of the cranes they activated during the day. In contrast to shots taken in the yards that depict glimpses of structures too large to fit in the frame, giving a sense of immensity to the place, bird's-eye-views offer occasional perspectives on the housing estates, and their immediate vicinity to the yards. The iconic shot in *Launch* is taken from one of those streets, the terraced houses rallying the perspective towards the *World Unicorn* towering like a titan above the lot, then gliding down and out of the frame as the ship is set out to sea.

The launch itself is a merry occasion, as local crowds gather to witness the event. Distinguished personalities, including Princess Anne, business representatives from Swan Hunter & Tyne Shipbuilders as well as Kawasaki, the Kobe firm that supplied the ship's engines, are on the programme. They inhabit a different world: a glass box in which the speeches will be made accommodates the passing figures, who are resolutely kept apart from the inhabitants and workers. Hence the celebratory documentation of the launch gains a deeper, more uncertain tone. Amber member Graeme Rigby underlined the multilayered nature of the group's documentary practice: "There is that belief that what is important in documentary, or the documentary that we espouse, is narrative, it's about the importance of a story, and how that is captured, the clarity and the ambiguity of how that is captured, and the richness of the imagery is all part of that."<sup>13</sup>

In the tradition of the British documentary movement of the 1930s associated with John Grierson and Humphrey Jennings, Amber paired realist and social political engagement with poetic authorial inspiration.<sup>14</sup> However, this engagement also corresponded to a different period of

11 *Amber: A Short History* (Newcastle: Amber/Side Gallery, 1977). Founding members were Murray Martin, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, Graham Denman, and Graham Smith.

12 See website, accessed December 19, 2022, <http://www.tynebuiltships.co.uk/W-Ships/worldunicorn1974.html>. In the 1970s, the ship was at the service of Ludlow Navigation Co., London.

13 Graeme Rigby in conversation with the author, March 10, 2008.

14 Elizabeth Sussex and John Grierson, "Grierson on Documentary: The Last Interview," *Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 1972): 24–30. Tobias Horchscherf and James Leggott, "From *Launch*

shifting momentum in the British industrial landscape. Rather than to the 1930s, Amber's project spoke to the early 1970s in Britain, when the shipbuilding industry was at a crossroads. If the work of Jennings and Grierson aimed to capture the correlation between industrial modernization and the emergence of new modes of perception in British society, Amber rather found itself immersed in the valiant but threatened world of 1970s shipbuilding.<sup>15</sup> Behind the rich and buoyant imagery of the launch, a sense of uneasiness is briefly captured in the spatial barriers separating the dignitaries and the workers who watch from a distance.<sup>16</sup> Not everyone here was "on the same boat," which the subsequent narrative makes clear. For the industry faced growing global competition, in particular, from Japan and South Korea.<sup>17</sup> Shipyards in Europe needed to address issues of modernization, as the pace of capital investment became more intensive worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Amalgamation was a critical issue, underlined by the 1966 Geddes Report commissioned by the Wilson government, and addressed in the Northeast by Swan Hunter infrastructural mergers of smaller industries on the River Tyne.<sup>19</sup> The film's sense of monumental awe for the ship structures is genuine, yet to some extent also misleading. In an interview with Darren Newbury, Murray Martin remembers reactions he witnessed in Germany, where the underlying narrative engulfing British shipbuilding was evident. When first shown on German television, as Murray Martin told Darren Newbury:

[German audiences] saw it as a political movie. They defined it politically, because it showed how impoverished the British shipyards were, and they realised they couldn't last; even though they could build these fantastic ships and they had this fantastic skill base of men, the technology they were using was 30 years out of date.<sup>20</sup>

to *Shooting Magpies: Locating the Amber Film Collective*," in *Made in Newcastle: Visual Culture*, ed. Hilary Fawcett (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2007), 101–16.

15 Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle, "Humphrey Jennings, the Left and the Experience of Modernity in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain," *History Workshop Journal* 75 (Spring 2013): 190–212.

16 Tyne Built Ships, "A History of Tyne Shipbuilders and the Ships That They Built," accessed June 15, 2021, <http://www.tynebuiltships.co.uk>.

17 Martin Stopford, *Maritime Economics* (London: Routledge, 2009).

18 Lewan, "West European Shipbuilding," 144–45.

19 Nicholas Comfort, *Surrender: How British Industry Gave Up the Ghost 1952–2012* (London: Biteback, 2012), 77.

20 Darren Newbury, "Documentary Practices and Working-Class Culture: An Interview with Murray Martin (Amber Films and Side Photographic Gallery)," *Visual Studies* 17, no. 2 (2002): 113–28.



Observers in the early 1970s noted that British shipyards were in need of investment, the scale of which required governmental intervention.<sup>21</sup> In 1977, the British shipbuilding industry was nationalized under the Wilson-Callaghan Labour government.<sup>22</sup> Yet the signs were bleak for a declining sector.

The Amber Collective's early films documented working-class labour, but also the progressive desertification of the industrial landscape in northeast England. It produced *Quayside* in 1979, a meditative promenade down Newcastle's Grey Street towards Side Street and Queen Street, a few steps away from the River Tyne's banks. Under the shadow of the monumental Tyne Bridge built in the 1920s, Victorian houses which once housed offices of Newcastle upon Tyne's merchants, stand abandoned.<sup>23</sup> Voices on the soundtrack remember when the river was filled with ships and action, when the coal trade brought businesses and employment to the city. "It's pretty dead now," said those people who vanished together with the maritime industry. In the 1980s, under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, British industries were re-privatized, albeit within a free market that would only seal the declining fortunes of the British shipyards.<sup>24</sup>

These developments were captured by Amber in a continued commitment to representing the voices and experiences of local communities. This documentation also took a fictional form in films such as *Fading Light* (1989), focusing on the transformation of fishing industries in North Shields through the story of a financially struggling independent fisherman and his daughter. While professional actors perform in the film, it is based on a deep engagement with workers on site because they are trained by local fishermen and spend days at sea. The realism culminates in a dramatic ending with a sea storm. In other films, Amber's coalfield stories, which include *The Star* (1997), *Like Father* (2001), and *Shooting Magpies* (2005), focus on the social consequences of the closure of the pits in Durham County, and typically include local workers and communities in the cast.<sup>25</sup>

Over more than fifty years of activities, Amber has accumulated an extraordinary photographic and film archive of the region, which can be used by its inhabitants and particularly communities associated with industrial

21 F. Taylor, "Shipyards of the Future: Possibilities and Prospects," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Mathematical and Physical Sciences* 273, no. 2131 (September 5, 1972): 173–81.

22 Comfort, *Surrender*, 79.

23 *Quayside* (Amber Films, 1979), 17 mins.

24 Comfort, *Surrender*, 110.

25 Horchscherf and Leggott, "From *Launch* to *Shooting Magpies*," 105.

transformations. *The Art of Shipbuilding* (2017) combines some of these different archival layers with contemporary documentary practice. Black-and-white archival footage from the 1970s and 1980s (including photographs by Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen and Bruce Rae) alternates with coloured shots from the 1990s, interspaced with recent interviews of former workers on the tanker's shipbuilding sites. The workers remember the harshness of the job and the spirit of camaraderie that prevailed at the time. The binding narrative of this transitory industrial body is sewn by the poetry of Jack Davitt and the painting of Peter Burns, both former employees in the shipbuilding industry. At the end of *The Art of Shipbuilding*, the former welder John Bridgewood recalls the launch of the *World Unicorn* and, as the tanker slides down the wooden structure into the Tyne, with the families and other onlookers admiring the mighty scene, the narrator recalls: "You could feel the draft." In the subsequent sequence, photographs of the living areas adjacent to the shipbuilding sites are shown, demolished, while the choral anthem *Jerusalem*, based on a poem by William Blake, played by a brass band, resonates in the background. Thus, *Launch* emblematically captures the transindustrial shift taking place in Britain, whereby a powerful maritime infrastructure was in the process of being dismantled and transferred to distant locations in the world. The temporal nature of these transindustrial transformations is also significantly underlined in Amber's work through the use and mix of contemporary and archival footage, reflecting on the stratification of technologies and memories that bound communities and places together. Significantly, the documentary captures the material and cultural construction of a place layered by historical and economic forces as it was about to disappear. Such transformations are seen in the paradigmatic milieu of Great Britain, the dominant nation on the seas for more than two centuries, and metonymically representative of mutations taking place throughout Western Europe.

### Re-enacting Alternate Cooperations: *Politik in der Höhe*, Cora Piantoni, 2013

At the other end of the North Sea, past the Oresund Strait into the Baltic Sea, under a blue sky, the frame of an image is repeated to the right and top by an industrial bridge, vertical and diagonal windows cast in shadows from the sun's rays coming from the left. The rooftops, a streetlamp, a tree, and a crane emerge from below. To the right, human figures appear climbing up onto the bridge, then walking left onto a deck. A rope falls into the void,

then another: four ropes dangle from the metallic structure above. The camera zooms in. From the bridge, four men start descending along one of the ropes, in climbing gear; progressively, the figures leave the metallic bridge above to enter the void below. Close ups on each figure follow their downward progress. Eventually, the four men sway against the blue sky, having stopped mid-way in their descent, the ground somewhere below being of no particular interest. They enjoy the moment, chatting in fact, with each other, talking about the good old days. These images were recorded in Poland in the twenty-first century, though they are a re-enactment of the type of working conditions experienced by members of the Świetlik cooperative in the 1980s. *Politik in der Höhe* (2013), a film by Cora Piantoni, was made in the shipyard in Gdańsk.<sup>26</sup> It revisits the story of the industrial climbing cooperative Świetlik created in the aftermath of the Solidarność movement and active between 1983 and 1994. In the summer of 1980, a strike of considerable momentum began in the Gdańsk Shipyard. The workers negotiated with the then socialist government to create independent unions.<sup>27</sup> A year later, in December 1981, General Jaruzelski suspended the union's freedom and imposed martial law. Martial law was lifted in 1983, and in the next few years, a limited liberalization of Polish society took place.<sup>28</sup> This would end with a peaceful transition to democracy in 1989. The first partially free parliamentary elections took place, leading to the election of Lech Wałęsa, one of the union's founders, as Poland's new president in 1990. As Mirosław Rybicki explains, the cooperative Świetlik was founded by recent graduates from the University of Gdańsk, who had been involved in student organization. They had sympathies with the Solidarność movement and were looking for alternatives to employment in a system to which they were opposed.<sup>29</sup> The creation of private companies was allowed under certain regulations in Poland, and so, Świetlik started as a cooperative providing cleaning services to buildings as well as industrial sites, including shipyards. The cooperative employed one thousand people between 1983 and 1994, providing additional support to union workers and intellectuals.<sup>30</sup>

26 *At the Height of Politics / Politik in der Höhe* (Cora Piantoni, 2013), 10.30 mins.

27 Marie-Claude de St Hilaire, "Chronologie des événements polonais: 1980–82," *Politique étrangère* 1, no. 47 (1982): 109–14.

28 Maciej Bartkowski, "Poland's Solidarity Movement (1980–1989)," *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict*, 2009, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/polands-solidarity-movement-1980-1989/>.

29 *Buon Lavoro! Four Films on Workers' Communities by Cora Piantoni* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2017), 83–84.

30 *Buon Lavoro!*, 85–86.

The former colleagues of the cooperative seen in the opening of *Politik der Höhe* are re-enacting their work experience as part of Świetlik and reminiscing on the period that bound them together in the 1980s. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the four men who have since moved on to other activities, revisit a typical setting within which they would have been working two decades ago as part of the cooperative. As different shots of the climbers hanging in the blue sky unfold, extracts of two interviews with former Świetlik members, Andrzej Kowalczyk and Mirosław Rybicki, take us back in time. We are informed of the inception of the cooperative by students who had gained skills working for technical departments of the University of Gdańsk. The social and political conditions of the 1980s are evoked, and while the cooperative was grounded on an opposition to the communist regime, both interviewees stress the camaraderie at the heart of the organization. Their bond was strengthened by the risks and shared responsibility involved in the climbing operations, its openness to different political views—"conservative, liberal, anarchist, and non-politically opiniated"—and importantly, its capacity to open a space of self-development for its members. As the film comes to an end, we are told that in the aftermath of 1989 and the organization of democratic elections in Poland, many cooperative members changed occupation, some going into politics, some finding another line of work. The interviewees guide us to a particular time of socio-political constraint and initiative.

In an essay on Piantoni's films, Aneta Szyłak reflects on the dissolution of Świetlik and other similar cooperatives in the post-socialist era. She points out that the embrace of the free market economy came suddenly and without a safety net for many innovative and radical organizations that strived to place control in the worker's hands in the wake of *Solidarność*.<sup>31</sup>

The 1990s economic turn in Poland had a dramatic impact on the Gdańsk Shipyard. The shipyard occupies a considerable area stretching over the last miles of the Vistula River flowing into the Baltic Sea. The fall of socialism brought the yards and its management into unknown territory. There, as in Britain two decades earlier, modernization was an issue as the existing infrastructure had become obsolete; the disappearance of its main customer, the USSR, created daunting challenges.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, the timeline of transformations in Poland differed noticeably from that of Western Europe, pointing to

31 Aneta Szyłak, "Archived Communities in the Work of Cora Piantoni," in *Buon Lavoro!*, 93–102.

32 Preston Keat, "Fallen Heroes: Explaining the Failure of the Gdańsk Shipyard, and the Successful Early Reform Strategy in Szczecin and Gdynia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 36 (2003): 209–30.

the differing stages of de-industrialization in European countries. The shipyard remained under government control. And yet, despite financial support, the government's inability to introduce strategic reforms and to channel sufficient external investments led to the yards being officially declared bankrupt in 1996. Then began a new phase for the site under a privatized regime.<sup>33</sup>

By revisiting the stories and memories of Świetlik, Piantoni brings the viewer back to the historical intersection of Gdańsk in the early 1990s: it is a spatial and temporal border zone represented as a source of potential transformation in the present. Bill Nichols reflects on documentary re-enactments and points to the haunting at the heart of the recreation of prior events: there is an element of mourning for that which was and is no longer.<sup>34</sup> Piantoni's films are typically anchored in specific images, around which the narrative unfolds through sound, personal recollections, and reflections. These images function as both a reconstituted archival depository, and in Nichols's words, a "fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same events lack." In *Radio Gap* (2016), which revisits the history of a 1970s Genoese pirate radio, interviews of the protagonists alternate with sequences shot from a car in the city retracing the routes taken to interfere with national media. In *Songs of Work* (2014), the workers in a stonemason cooperative in Porto evoke the singing that used to accompany the moving of large stones. The iconic reconstitution signals a *desire* to reinvest in the past. Nichols also underlines how re-enactments allow us to "vivify the sense of lived experience, the *vécu* of others."<sup>35</sup> From this perspective and in the context of Piantoni's practice, the fantasy subject functions as an agent of transindustrial mobility, binding technological and cultural times, places and experiences together that characterize the intertwined nature of a transindustrial condition.

This nod to Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* points to a political site, which is crucial to the understanding of *Politik in der Höhe*. Societies produce spaces, in which a triple relation is at play: the perceived, the conceived, the lived.<sup>36</sup> As opposed to an abstract conception of spatial design, Lefebvre points to the embodied spatial experience of users, an experience that tends to be silenced by economic and political forces. Piantoni's work leans less towards melancholy than *aspiration*. The re-enactment suggests the possibility

33 This period is explored by Magda Szcześniak in chapter 2 of this volume.

34 Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 72–89, 74.

35 Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," 88.

36 Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, 55–68.

of reinventing, remodelling, in drawing from a realm of possibilities that once existed.<sup>37</sup> An engaged celebration of working solidarity mirrors the emblematic documentary film *Les hommes du port* by Alain Tanner (1995), focusing on dockers' lives in Genoa. Here, footage of contemporary interviews with workers is mixed with archive imagery of the docks, as well as the personal recollections of the filmmaker who lived and worked in the city as a young man in the 1950s. Piantoni and Tanner capture the transindustrial as a positive aspirational value through collective resilience, where the binding collective fabric of the past refuses to be erased by the wheel of history. In the void of Gdańsk, remembrance of former collective cooperation and solidarity is presented both in the form of the documentation of a bygone era, and in its re-enactment, its possible alternate constructions of the present.

### Strategic Deserts: *Quai*, Marie Reinert, 2012–14

A close-up on a gigantic hull also opens *Quai* by Marie Reinert (2012–14). The quays in question turn out to be spectral, eerie landscapes seemingly devoid of tangible materiality, but of a different sort from the semi-abandoned riverside in Newcastle of the late 1970s. The following sequence shows a long tracking shot over petrol containers. No living creature is seen in this interminable port infrastructure. Businesses have not gone away; on the contrary, the modernization of maritime economy has led to a desertification of the landscape. In reflecting on the infrastructure at the heart of the film, as well as her own movements within the site, Reinert remarks:

We are in a relation to landscape with the pipeline. The questioning that I wished to pursue was that of the invisible. At certain moments we come close to the action, between the boats and the pipelines. The sound is very important here, the sound of petrol in the pipelines. We are in a relation to the machine and the body of merchandise. I also make use of the surveillance instruments of the universe in which I find myself, which gives a particular texture to the film.<sup>38</sup>

37 Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," 84–87. Nichols offers five categories he sees in the spectrum of re-enactments: realist dramatization, typifications, Brechtian distantiation, stylization, and parody and irony. The Brechtian distantiation is the most useful to consider Piantoni's *Politik in der Höhe*, in that the clear sense that the re-enactment is taking place in the present in a conscious commentary mode adopted by the actors, which allows "a stronger link to historical specificity" and, we can add in Brechtian fashion, political engagement.

38 Marie Reinert in conversation with the author, March 7, 2016.

The film is the result of an exploration of the gas and petrol harbour of Fos-sur-Mer, fifty kilometres West of Marseille. The facilities were developed in the 1960s, when a government incentive transformed the semi-aquatic plane in the River Rhone's delta into an industrial area servicing large petrol and gas containers. The development was supposedly in the interests of spatial availability offered by the region to accommodate large modern infrastructures, and the need to develop economic assets in the South of France.<sup>39</sup> Marseille had historically benefited from its maritime commerce with the *Outre-mer* and the French colonies whose commerce was in decline in the post-war period. The new port was envisioned as an economic hub placing continental terminals at the centre of Mediterranean and global trade. In the late twentieth century, French maritime industries, like their European counterparts, suffered from global restructuring. Heavy petrochemical industries remained in activity in Fos-sur-Mer, albeit with declining volumes and uncertain futures.<sup>40</sup> In the early twenty-first century, *Quai* observes the flattened scenery from above through portholes that increase the sense of an extra-terrestrial experience. Reinert explains:

We have a view over the landscape from the observation towers—what I was interested in when entering the gas and petrol harbour, was that in that open space, outdoors, there are places where you can't place a camera, not even a mobile phone. I needed a specific tool to film in certain areas. I put a camera into an explosion-proof porthole, that I created with workers in the port. It has a restricted perspective, which doesn't come from an aesthetic intention and gives a sense of the place's constraints.<sup>41</sup>

The camera goes up the circular towers, where we can appreciate a lunar landscape. Nevertheless, crucial operations take place under the scorching sun:

It feels like wearing a diving suit; my body moves slowly, with heaviness. When you are ascending petrol containers thirty metres above the ground, it is like a mountain ascension; and in the end, you gain access to

39 Jacques Joly and Henri Chamussy, "Géographie du port engagé: Le port industriel de Fos-sur-mer," *Revue de géographie alpine* 57, no. 4 (1969): 831–48.

40 Michèle Joannon and Christianne Lees, "Les dynamiques spatiales de l'industrie dans l'aire métropolitaine marseillaise," *Méditerranée* 87, Special issue on *Industries en Méditerranée de la marginalisation à la mondialisation* (1997): 35–44.

41 Marie Reinert in conversation with the author, March 7, 2016.

a landscape which is an in-between, a no-man's land, where, as always, surreptitiously, a strategic and political situation is unfolding.<sup>42</sup>

This is no politically engaged documentary, however. There is no clear-cut lesson from the imagery, but rather, an attuning to the underlying flows of the world: specifically in the petroleum and gas trading that fuels global transportation and economies. The body is invisible yet sustains our visual perception. Reinert's practice is informed by performative practices, in particular, dance.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the weight of the embodied presence that supports the eye of the camera remains latent when it is carried by the artist up the towers. However, the sanguine channels pumping the lens up the stairs directly morph into the visible, if enigmatic, "capitalist machine" and its propensity to decode and deterritorialize flows.<sup>44</sup> In *L'anti-Oedipe*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the body of Capital without organs, as the bewitching infinite search for surplus value. To former social organizations that aimed "to codify the flows of desire," to pin down, register, and control the lives and aspirations of its members, the "capitalist machine" is seen, in contrast, as a great facilitator of two types of de-coding. It is the decoded fluxes of production through money-capital, and the decoded fluxes of work that promote the rise of the free worker.<sup>45</sup> In doing so, the social fabric is brushed aside to the benefit of a "body without organs" in which the quest for surplus value reigns supreme. In the landscape of Fos-sur-Mer, we see the *material* form of this evanescent body in the geometric arrangement of metallic containers. Yet, it is hidden behind the tubes and the pipelines in which the very real and viscous circulation of energy proceeds, tangibly feeding the abstract machine of global capital.

At the end of *Quai*, humans are finally seen, but not in the flesh. Their appearance is robotic due to the diverse gear they are required to wear, protecting against the hazards of the site and the materials which are stocked there. The use of surveillance cameras at this point in the film completes the spectrum of embodied variations, by plainly removing its human form. All that remains is the industrial complexion, the metallic appearance of the site's surface. A final shot at night is illuminated by a radiant light, as the sleepless machinery of the port powers on.

42 Marie Reinert in conversation with the author, March 7, 2016.

43 "Roll on roll off. In conversation with Marie Reinert," TETI Group, 2017.

44 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 41.

45 Deleuze and Guattari, *L'anti-Œdipe*, 41.



### Unfolding Archi-finance: *Total Algorithms of Partiality*, Johanna Bruckner, 2017–18.

A building site, temporary blocks, rods, fences surrounding the perimeter, rough ground, the red and white stripes of temporary signalization on barriers and plastic ropes used to frame space, an aquatic pond, wild grass, a figure under the sun, painstakingly pulling an invisible rope. Three figures, one slumped on the sandy ground, two others bent over her, walk their hands in knot-type gestures along her leg, then bend their right arms in concert and in repetition towards the lying body, until it starts slowly to move and turn around itself. A figure holding a metal rod, bent halfway horizontally in tense physical equilibrium, one knee on the ground, the other leg stretched behind her. There, another figure is in the same posture, balanced by the oscillating rod. Then, both are twisting their heads to the pole, and bringing it before them as they find a seated posture, slowly letting the pole rest on the ground. These are four performative moments in Johanna Bruckner's *Total Algorithm of Partiality* (2018), taking place in the midst of Hamburg's flagship urban redevelopment scheme *Hafencity*.<sup>46</sup> Scaffolds and scaffolding—associated with the abstract algorithms that propel the material appearance of the building sites—are central references in the work. *Hafencity* is produced in collaboration with dancers who embody the questions, ideas, and demands of the film's script. Bruckner stresses the central questions at the heart of the film:

I have a number of scaffolds in the work; scaffolds can be a support structure, but they can also be understood as heavily associated with the infrastructure of digital logistic[s] involved on (the building) site, which itself is connected to finance capital. With the performers, we read texts on the subject, and discussed the circulation of finance capital in the building industry. We aim to physically break digital and data fluxes, and to construct alternate infrastructures through the body.<sup>47</sup>

Redevelopment of the *Hafencity* in Hamburg began in 1998, following the city's approval of several urban planning proposals aimed at regenerating

<sup>46</sup> *Total Algorithm of Partiality* (Johanna Bruckner, 2018), 55.46 mins.

<sup>47</sup> Johanna Bruckner in conversation with Vanessa Muller, Amélie Brisson Darveau and Cora Piantoni, as part of the exhibition *All So Near: Textile Bodies, China Girls and Archi-Finance*, Factor Künstlerhaus, Hamburg, April 2018, curated by Gabriel Gee.

the city's former historical docklands.<sup>48</sup> These had come into decline with the port's migration further down the River Elbe in search of larger spaces to accommodate container terminals and ever bigger container ships.<sup>49</sup> The redevelopment of the area emphasized its establishment of mixed-uses, public spaces, and sustainability. Bruckner's work questions these ambitions by focusing on housing projects and using the as-yet-uncertain building site as a stage. Central to the investigation is the idea that behind officially progressive social agendas lies a harsher gentrification process whereby financial interests take precedence over collective good. In the opening sequences shot in the dawn penumbra, performers create models of the city experienced on the ground using ad hoc materials: a brick, a folding metre, lumps of earth. Later in the day, construction plans are drawn with chalk on the site's massive foundation stones. A voice points out that the needs of residential housing cannot be met by traditional architecture. At this stage, we are directed towards algorithms, understood as a key component commanding the design of social-architecture. The voiceover states:

Algorithms can be identified as the structure of the scaffold, the vertical and horizontal lines of the scaffold are found on construction sites, which essentially support the building process, correlating to the form and structure of an algorithmic instruction; what is the algorithm probability of social mix, the probability of accountability, what factors does it derive from?

Another layer of the narrative is at play when the performers and the artist discuss socio-political and economic issues related to Hamburg's housing scheme. At the heart of the conversations, and their embodied activation on site, is a questioning of the *Hafencity* policy of community development. It advocates mixed housing, and yet, its selection criteria are based on private funds and market interest. Social housing is seen as favouring lower- and middle-income groups over more disadvantaged ones. Additionally, large parts of the new housing development are geared towards the private market with the goal of maximizing profit through selling the land, even though it was physically built by a flexible migrant workforce. In the activation of the dance script, as Marius Henderson underlines, an element of unforeseen and unbounded externality enters the planned protected realm of capital

48 Marichela Sepe, "Urban History and Cultural Resources in Urban Regeneration: A Case of Creative Waterfront Renewal," *Planning Perspectives* 28, no. 4 (2013): 595–613.

49 Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

investment.<sup>50</sup> The multilayered and trans-media piece—at the crossroads of dance, drawing, sculpture, installation, writing, and video—evokes the pioneer dance groups of the 1930s such as the Workers Dance League. These groups phrased their socio-political demands in body and movement, an aspect Bruckner explicitly referred to in the performance piece and film *Rebel Bodies* (2015–16). The layering of the film narrative articulates this collective aspiration, through an incorporation of the process of common reflection and writing. The body without organs manifest in the algorithmic operations of architectural planning is opposed by an embodied collective. The collective physically, vocally, rhetorically, and visually claims its capacity to resist imposed abstractions, and to *reclaim* the digital channels and protocols that supported its design in the first place. It does so through collective discussions that prepare the dance script, the performative and physical iteration of the script on site, as well as the representation of the process, outcome and political aspirations of the filmic piece. Such a juxtaposition of media and sources usefully points to the increasingly multilayered nature of the transindustrial condition, which commands our contemporary experience of the world through manifolded screens as well as sounds, texts, and bodies. The navigation of our twenty-first-century realities requires multidimensional devices, media, and technological forms, in which the analogue morphs into the digital, the screen reverberates the sweat of the flesh.<sup>51</sup> The final sequence of *Hafencity*'s “score for workers”—the artistic script composed to articulate these ideas and positions—culminates in a series of demands advocating social justice. Thus, *Hafencity* tears the veil from slick regeneration discourses to show the dust and grit of their material conditions. It also shows the struggle for a return to collective decision-making in the service of the common good.

### **Inside the Virtual Ship: *The Cargonauts – The Demo*, Anna Lascari and Ilias Marmaras, 2015**

A multidimensional space within which maritime industry operates in the twenty-first century is captured through a digital and interactive

50 Marius Henderson, “Embodied Enquiry and Insurgent Research Creation in Johanna Bruckner’s *Total Algorithm of Partiality*,” accessed June 10, 2021, <http://johannabruckner.com>.

51 Lev Manovich, “Postmedia Aesthetics,” in *Transmedia Frictions: The Digital, the Arts, and the Humanities*, ed. Marsha Kinder and Tara McPherson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 34–44.

platform created by the research project *Cargonauts*.<sup>52</sup> *Cargonauts* is part of Logistical Worlds, a critical platform exploring the new Silk Roads in Athens, Valparaiso, and Kolkata. It focuses on logistics, and in particular, algorithmic design as it comes to forcibly implement regimes of labour.<sup>53</sup> *Cargonauts* explores possible tactics of resistance to software regimes that the video footage *Piraeus in Logistical World* (14.13 minutes) describes as “constituting human bodies and labour as mere appendages.”<sup>54</sup> As part of the project, Anna Lascari and Ilias Marmaras designed an online game interface in which players can enter the part of Piraeus bought by the Chinese maritime business COSCO.<sup>55</sup> An 11.43-minute demo gives a rounded view of the issues at hand, represented on site through a graphic rendition of the Piraeus terminal.

It starts at night-time, inside a maritime café with a view over the harbour, black-and-white photographs on the walls, ships, streets, portraits, traditional music in the background. Two men are seated at a table with a chequered cloth, talking. One of them is leaving his job at the port. The reason? He is sick of last-minute calls to duty, text messages as little as two hours before the shift starts, that is, the “extreme flexibility” of labour conditions. What about the guy at the window, contemplating the container terminal below? What does he think? Yes, he agrees. Phone beeps. He goes out. A street, the man by the road, the port is on the other side. The camera rotates around him, providing a 360-degree view of the surroundings. No one is to be seen. He crosses the road, moves in. A text appears: “new recruits are neither genderless nor raceless. They are mostly young, robust, healthy, educated, masculine and Greek. By following the protocols and procedures in an algorithmic labour environment, they tend to resemble docile cyborgs.” The sounds of a ship horn can be heard, an electronic gate is seen, he enters the container terminal. He meets a co-worker; a discussion ensues: there is a meet-up taking place shortly to discuss workers’ organization. We are told that without collective cooperation between workers, the port companies can easily dismantle the rights of the individual. Such arrangements on top of the mechanical nature of the work in the harbour make employment

52 Accessed April 2, 2022, <https://cargonauts.net>.

53 Accessed April 2, 2022, <https://logisticalworlds.org>.

54 The *Cargonauts* project is conceptually designed by Anna Lascari, Ilias Marmaras, Brett Neilson, and Ned Rossiter.

55 Additional credits go to Yannis Scoulidas, for game development and programming, Theodoris Giannakis for artistic input, texts and voices by Nelli Kampouri, Brett Neilson, Ned Rossiter, Dimitris Cosmides, Theodore Kapsalis, Stelios Minotakis, Alex Salapatas, Yannis Skoulidas, and Thomas Tsoutsos.

strenuous and exploitative. Sirens scream suddenly, having abandoned his task for a few seconds to exchange some words, the man on duty has overseen a truck requiring immediate attention, the temporal line of efficiency is broken, and he must go back without delay to resume productive continuity. One thinks of the comments made by an employee of Rotterdam's container terminal interviewed in the documentary film *The Forgotten Space* by Allan Sekula and Noel Burch (2010). The man says at the outset of the film that the shifts in the cranes in charge of transferring containers are bordering on the hypnotic, locking the workers into a state of hypnosis within the small operating cabins. Next in *Cargonauts*, we follow our guide to a meeting held between towers of containers to discuss the possibility of setting up a union to present a united front to challenge an elusive employer.

Piraeus is the historical maritime port of Athens, dating back to antiquity. Corporatization of the port occurred in 2002, while in 2008, the port authority opened a call for the further development of the container terminals, which was leased to the Chinese company COSCO for thirty years.<sup>56</sup> In a 2018 report for the European Council on Foreign Relations entitled "Blue China," Mathieu Duchâtel and Alexandre Duplaix underline, "the considerable and strategic economic and political expansion of Chinese networks across the oceans, that the European Union and its members have to dialogue with, and in some cases confront."<sup>57</sup> In Piraeus, since the takeover, issues of labour management and conditions of work have been reported together with anxiety about the expansion of Chinese global economics in the heartland of Europe. *Cargonauts* explores the stakes at play when the process of harbour modernization associated with container technology is implemented amid increasing geopolitical tensions, such as those witnessed in maritime trade and infrastructure. The title evokes the mythical quest of Jason and his companions to find the golden fleece, transferred to the contemporary era of *cargo* containers, filled with goods for the sustenance of global growth. *Cargonauts* also offers an additional option to the viewer. Namely, to act. In the online video game version developed by Ana Lascari and Ilias Marmaras, it is also possible to enter the port as a player, and to command the movements of a figure—a worker—to explore the grounds. The algorithms of the program are reappropriated in the service of independent empowering

56 Brett Neilson, "Precarious in Piraeus: On the Making of Labour Insecurity in a Port Concession," *Globalizations* 16, no. 4 (2019): 559–74.

57 Mathieu Duchâtel and Alexandre Sheldon Duplaix, "Blue China: Navigating the Maritime Silk Roads to Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, accessed April 21, 2023, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/blue\\_china\\_navigating\\_the\\_maritime\\_silk\\_road\\_to\\_europe/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/blue_china_navigating_the_maritime_silk_road_to_europe/).

action. Such an opening parallels the development of interactive design in film, or what Manovich signalled in a regime shift as information behaviour, superseding the traditional medium categories based on distinct materials with a post-media aesthetics.<sup>58</sup> In the age of software, *Cargonauts* offers tactical routes to mirror the implementation of increasingly complex and remote digital superstructures. The demo represents tactics in the container terminal: the workers move and express possible forms of deviation, even sabotage, of the dictatorial system based on the constant search for surplus value. Subsequently, the game opens a door for the viewer to become actor, and as such, to activate questions about the player's own position and engagement. Transformations in maritime technology and economics do not solely concern those who work within the industry. They extend their influence through the outreach of global consumption and their negotiation in the present. The *Cargonauts* website, in connection with its sibling Logistical Worlds website, extends this possibility of deviating, reappropriating, and reimagining, to a multimedia platform that articulates an alternate form of collective organization to that of the constraining container, algorithmic, logic. The *Cargonauts* project unfolds transindustrial fabrication in the *longue durée*, to use Fernand Braudel's term, in juxtaposing dynamics of cargo transportation from antiquity to contemporary times; it also articulates the complexity of the transindustrial condition in the present through the lens of port infrastructure, in which digital machinery and social embodied actions mingle at the crossroads of global cooperation and confrontation.

## Conclusion

The films and video game considered here provide a glimpse into the historical transformations of European maritime industries in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Specifically, their key implications for bodies, machines, and voices. With *Launch*, we first peered into the 1970s at a world about to disappear, at least in its then present form: a world inherited from the industrial revolution that was displaced by infrastructural modernization in the context of increasing global maritime connectivity. We ended within the *Cargonauts* inside the container terminal, the model of efficiency for the transportation of goods from sea to land and *vice versa*. The European dimension is represented in the films through the

58 Pat Aufderheide, "Interactive Documentaries: Navigation and Design," *Journal of Film and Video* 67, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2015): 69–78; Manovich, "Postmedia Aesthetics."

general impact of global competition, the specific disjunction of historical timelines with the end of state socialism in the late 1980s, and contemporary interrogations regarding the increasing influence of the new maritime Silk Roads connecting Europe to Eastern Asian powerhouses. Additionally, if infrastructure mutates, the films in different styles address the issue of lived experience: of the community, and of individual embodied perception. To the machine-body combination is added a third bridging component: the voice. The films give voice to—be it in the tradition of the documentary—re-enactment, authorial and fictional accounts, or multimedia articulations in which the film is one element in a broader chain of cooperation. Combined in space and time, in object and subject, the films outline a transindustrial movement, both in the object of their representation—maritime industrial transformation—and the form of this representation, whereby the analogue leads to the digital, the software, the database, without rupturing the link between the two. The digital voice survives the analogue, the archival process mutates from one format to another. Furthermore, as Lev Manovich insightfully remarks, the new technologies suggest new tools and modes of understanding the past, thereby inverting the patterns through which meaning emerges: *Cargonauts* also sheds light on the Amber Collective's long quest and dedication to working lives and experiences in northeast England. Hence the potential use of the term *viscous*, rather than fluid, or explosive, to approach some of the industrial transformations depicted. Viscous nods to the Anthropocene and the impact of fossil fuel economies on our environment. The risk of industrial hazards is mirrored in the engagement of the films for social justice. Through the lens of the machine-body pair we are reminded of the complexity of macro (the planetary) and micro (the individual) scalar interpenetrations. In the face of this multilayered reality, the films suggest paths to bear witness and to act, to document and to re-enact, to displace and to reimagine, in a constant interrogation as to the means of being in the flux of history.

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## About the Author

**Gabriel N. Gee** is an art historian and writer. His research interests include the arts of port cities, interconnected global histories, and contemporary

artistic research – he is a member of the Swiss Artistic Research Network. He teaches art history at Franklin University, Switzerland. He is also the initiator and co-founder of the interdisciplinary study group TETI (Textures and Experiences of Trans-Industriality), active through workshops, exhibitions, culinary events, and publications.

## 8. Visualizing West Belfast, 1976–85

Documentary Photography and the Politics of Nostalgia

*Sinead Burns*

### Abstract

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Lower Falls community of West Belfast was disrupted, reconfigured, and redefined. The decline of traditional industries and intensive urban redevelopment were responsible for a series of radical physical and social transformations which threatened working-class community and identity. This Chapter discusses how these processes were engaged with and made visible in the work of Northern Irish photographer Martin Nangle who photographed the community in the 1970s and '80s as part of a documentary project. Through an analysis grounded primarily in the close reading of photographs, this chapter will explore how Nangle's work engaged with a critical nostalgia in the depiction of the changing urban and social landscape of the area.

**Keywords:** Belfast; photography; urban; de-industrialization; redevelopment; working class

Figure 8.1 presents the viewer with a cityscape of Belfast that appears profoundly connected to industry. Rows of terraced houses are clearly visible in the foreground and stretch deeper into the composition before they are occluded by chimney smoke. Tall industrial buildings, smokestacks, and church spires occasionally punctuate the panorama. As the viewer is drawn into the composition, the city is concealed further before the eye rises to rest on the horizon line of the Belfast Hills. Smoke generated by houses and industrial buildings hangs low over the neighbourhood and blurs the leading lines created by the streets, interrupting any sense of directional movement. The use of light evokes a sense of pastness reinforced by the opacity and synesthetic effect of the smoke, simultaneously generating



Figure 8.1: Martin Nangle, *Panoramic View of West Belfast Looking towards Shankill, Ardoyne, Cave Hill*, 1976. Source: Ulster Museum BELUM.W2016.20.176.

feelings of warmth, stillness, and temporal distance. The photograph looks like it could have been taken during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Only the automobiles in the bottom-right betray that it was in fact taken in 1976. The photograph presents an overtly aesthetic and sentimental version of an urban community, thereby mythologizing industrialization.

The photograph manifests what Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott have critiqued as a “creeping industrial nostalgia,” or “smokestack nostalgia.” Such nostalgia has valorized industry, industrial landscapes, and industrial work within visual and textual explorations of industrial change.<sup>1</sup> As sociologist Tim Strangleman has argued, such presentations of industrial nostalgia can be dangerous as they often fail to engage with the embodied realities of industrial work or lost industry. He notes that there is a “casual indifference to what became of the people laid off as a result of industrial change and the original material purpose of the built environment, which is now fetishized for its aesthetic value.”<sup>2</sup> Nostalgia has often been defined as

1 Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, “Introduction,” in Cowie and Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 14–15.

2 Tim Strangleman, “Smokestack Nostalgia, ‘Ruin Porn’ or Working-Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 27–37, 25.

a reactionary and sentimental emotion that reminisces and longs for a past that is better than the present.<sup>3</sup> As an emotion closely associated with loss and longing, nostalgia has been regarded as an uncritical and substandard explanatory shortcut by historians, with Tobias Becker arguing that it fails to “adequately describe the diverse uses of the past.”<sup>4</sup> However, in recent years, scholars have conceptually reappraised nostalgia, noting its critical and progressive potential to provoke dialectical engagement with both the past and present.<sup>5</sup> Such an engagement with nostalgia is then capable of mobilizing and empowering the histories, values, and experiences of working-class communities that experienced economic and social change by resituating them within a historical narrative.<sup>6</sup> Sherry Lee Linkon has echoed this view and has argued that there are variations of “smokestack nostalgia” within cultural representations of de-industrialization that can be approached “not only as representations of the past but also as a resource for imagining the future.”<sup>7</sup> For Linkon, cultural representations of all kinds may seemingly appear regressive. However, the potential lies in their ability to contribute to alternative narratives surrounding economic restructuring, which is vital when attempting to understand the long-term legacies of de-industrialization.<sup>8</sup>

3 For definitions of nostalgia see Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 7–18, 15; Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: Nostalgia, Art and the Society* (Cambridge: The Free Press, 2014), 73; Niklas Salmose, “Towards a Poetics of Nostalgia: The Nostalgic Experience in Modern Fiction” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2012), 163–64; Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, “Nostalgia for the Future: Memory, Nostalgia and the Politics of Class,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 7 (2017): 612–27; Stefan Berger, “Industrial Heritage and the Ambiguities of Nostalgia for an Industrial Past in the Ruhr Valley, Germany,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 16, no. 1 (2019): 36–64.

4 Tobias Becker, “The Meanings of Nostalgia: Genealogy and Critique,” *History and Theory* 57, no. 2 (2018): 234–50, 234; for further critiques of nostalgia see Tony Judt, “The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Post-war Europe,” *Daedalus* 121, no. 4 (1992): 83–118, 105; Charles Maier, *The End of Longing?: Towards a History of German Postwar Longing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1993).

5 Strangleman, “Smokestack Nostalgia,” 28; Berger, “Industrial Heritage,” 40; Smith and Campbell, “Nostalgia for the Future,” 614; Steven High, “Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 84 (2013): 140–53, 144; Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

6 Berger, “Industrial Heritage,” 40.

7 Sherry Lee Linkon, “Narrating Past and Future: Deindustrialized Landscapes as Resources,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 38–54, 40.

8 Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization*.

From the 1960s onwards, writers and academics have considered the intellectual significance of photography and have approached photographs as affective, material, and social objects to examine critically how photography can contribute to the development of history as an intellectual project. John Berger proposed an “alternative use of photographs” that enabled one to “construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of looking at photographs as illustrative tools representing singular and detached moments, we must consider the connections and associations between and beyond photographs within the image world, and the fine lines that connect them to other social, cultural, political, economic, and material systems in society. We need to reanimate photographs and place them within a “living context.”<sup>10</sup> In doing so, we can understand them within an ongoing temporality which is vital when attempting to examine the past.

Susan Sontag encourages us to look beyond the frame of an image and asks us to question the status of photographs, as by learning to accept the photograph as a construction, the viewer can think reflexively and interrogate not only the image but the knowledge that is generated from it and refracted within society.<sup>11</sup> If we understand photography as a series of visual, material, and social constructions; we can challenge the view of photography as absolute truth and consider instead how photographs acquire status through affective, material, and social interactions. Elizabeth Edwards has argued that in the production, consumption, and circulation of photographs, they engage with social relations and achieve levels of social saliency, importance, and efficacy through their encounter with other photographs and humans. Photographs then become embedded within social networks as active components of social relations.<sup>12</sup>

9 John Berger, *About Looking*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 64.

10 Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 61.

11 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 3; see also Jennifer Tucker, “Entwined Practices: Engagements with Photography in Historical Inquiry,” *History and Theory*, no. 4 (2009): 1–8, 2; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Books, 2000); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Miles Orvell, “Cultural Studies, Visual Studies, Historical Studies: Connecting the Dots,” *American Studies* 2 (Summer 2006): 87–103; Jennifer Evans, “Historicising the Visual,” *German Studies Review* 3 (October 2012): 485–89; Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Use of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

12 Elizabeth Edwards, “Objects of Affect: Photography beyond the Image,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, (2012): 221–34, 220–27.

Social practices become the crucial element that underpins a critical understanding of photography so we must, as historians, recognize the social lives of images. In doing so, we can engage with larger questions relating to knowledge, truth, and power. By looking within and beyond the photographic frame, we can consider the histories of images within multiple, complex, and interconnecting contexts. By tracing the fine lines between photographs, the systems of understanding that connect them, and the social practices that surround them, we can elevate the epistemological understanding of the past.

By resituating photographs within a “living context,” we can examine how they interacted with other images and people; consider how they were connected to social, cultural, political, economic, and material systems; and how they engaged with processes like de-industrialization. We can use photographs like Martin Nangle’s *Panoramic View of West Belfast Looking towards Shankill, Ardoyne, Cave Hill* (1976) as an entrance to better explore the histories, experiences, and legacies of de-industrialization in working-class communities. Further, we can examine how such images engaged critically with affective concepts like nostalgia as they negotiated the past and present within cultural representations of economic and social change. Northern Irish photographer Martin Nangle’s picture was part of a project entitled *Belfast Only All Other Places* that documented largely working-class communities in Belfast throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The photographs were exhibited in Belfast in May 1988 and included a number of photographs of the Lower Falls, a working-class district of West Belfast, that were taken by Nangle between 1976 and 1985. This chapter will examine how Nangle’s photographs of the Lower Falls engaged with processes of de-industrialization and social change.

Nangle’s photographs of the Lower Falls lend a critical nostalgia to the city, both of the past and in the redeveloped present, to challenge simplistic understandings of the apparent sentimental longing associated with nostalgia. Photography, it has been argued, is well-suited to nostalgic sentiment as it is a medium that can capture the present and return to past moments simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Photographs and nostalgia can be viewed as methods to collapse both time and distance. This leads to their bringing of the past closer to the present, in turn, provoking critical reflection on the impact of change over time. Nangle was interested in the negative long-term effects that economic, social, and urban restructuring had on the working-class community of the

13 Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

Lower Falls. I will demonstrate that he curated visualities of the past, not to evoke sentimental longing, but to provoke a critique of the present.<sup>14</sup>

## Understanding the Lower Falls

The Lower Falls in Belfast was bordered by Divis Street to the north, Lower Falls Road to the west, Durham Street to the east, and Grosvenor Road to the south. The area was originally known as the Pound Loney and was made up of streets of tightly packed Victorian terraced houses. They were built to accommodate the migration of mostly Catholic workers that flocked to the Lower Falls to work in the growing number of newly built textile mills and factories in the early twentieth century. Northern Ireland's industrial economy was built on textile production, shipbuilding, and engineering; and was divided along gender, sectarian, and class lines.<sup>15</sup> In 1901, for example, Catholics made up just 7 per cent of skilled shipyard workers.<sup>16</sup> In 1911, 85 per cent of Belfast Catholics lived in the west of the city in areas such as the Lower Falls. The Catholic population, particularly women, became increasingly dependent on the linen industry. The 1911 census revealed that 47 per cent of Catholic women were employed in textile production.<sup>17</sup> Some Catholic men worked in textile production also, however, the majority worked as general labourers.<sup>18</sup> The dependency of the Lower Falls on the linen industry made it particularly vulnerable to economic restructuring. In their report into unemployment in West Belfast, Mike Rolston and Bill Tomlinson have argued that as the industry contracted between 1950 and 1976, 54 per cent or almost forty thousand jobs in the textile industry in Northern Ireland were cut.<sup>19</sup> Census analysis reveals that between 1951 and 1971, the number of female textile workers and those employed within the garment industry in Belfast declined by over 60 per cent with the loss of almost twenty thousand jobs.<sup>20</sup>

14 Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); Strangleman, "Smokestack Nostalgia," 28.

15 A. C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart: Studies in the History of Catholic Belfast 1850–1950* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1996).

16 Sybil Gribbon, *Edwardian Belfast: A Social Profile* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1983), 47; Bill Rolston and Mike Tomlinson, *Unemployment in West Belfast: The Obair Report* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1988), 26.

17 Rolston and Tomlinson, *Unemployment in West Belfast*, 26.

18 Rolston and Tomlinson, *Unemployment in West Belfast*, 26.

19 Rolston and Tomlinson, *Unemployment in West Belfast*, 27.

20 Census data compared from Government of Northern Ireland, Census of Population of Northern Ireland of 1951: Belfast County Borough, "Occupations of Persons Aged 14 or Over"



The loss of industry and unemployment preceded urban redevelopment which caused major economic and social change in the Lower Falls. By the mid-twentieth century, the housing quality had rapidly deteriorated and living conditions were often unsanitary due to a lack of amenities such as running water. The area was earmarked for slum clearance and redevelopment in the 1960s. The Northern Ireland Housing Trust soon adopted a high-rise model similar to that seen in housing schemes like Glasgow's Red Road Flats and Sheffield's Park Hill Estate.<sup>21</sup> The Cullingtree Road/Grosvenor Road Redevelopment Area of multiple high-rises was proposed to alleviate the housing issues of the Lower Falls. It was intended to rehouse the population of the Lower Falls without impacting community ties, the local Catholic parish, or local government boundaries.<sup>22</sup> The first phase of the new 14-acre Divis Estate was opened in May 1968.<sup>23</sup> The damaging effects of de-industrialization and redevelopment were further exacerbated by the Troubles—violence between civilians, paramilitaries, and the security forces—the onset of which began soon after the opening of the Divis Estate in 1969. De-industrialization, redevelopment, and conflict continued to reinforce each other into the 1970s, contributing to intensive change that impacted the physical, social, economic, political, and cultural landscape of the area.

## Visualizing Community

In 1974, Nangle photographed everyday spaces within the Lower Falls such as the streets, workplaces, and shops that were at risk of demolition with the redevelopment of the area following de-industrialization. In his

(including “textile workers” [total: 16,061] and “makers of textile goods and articles of dress” [total: 13,576]), table 18, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/1951-census-belfast-county-borough-report.pdf>. with Northern Ireland General Register Office, “Industry by Sex and Area of Workplace” (including “textiles” [total: 5198] and “clothing” [total: 6286]), Census of Population 1971: Economic Activity Tables Northern Ireland, table 11, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/1971-census-economic-activity-tables-part-2.PDF>.

21 Interview with the architect of the Cullingtree Road/Grosvenor Road Redevelopment Area, Frank Robertson, for BBC Northern Ireland documentary, “The High Life,” August 29, 2011, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yeBykVOppQ>.

22 Divis Residents Association, *The Divis Report: Set Them Free* (Belfast: Divis Residents Association, 1986), 11; Father Des Wilson and Oliver Kearney, *West Belfast: Liberation or Oppression?* (Belfast: Self-Published, 1988), 8; Belfast Workers Research Unit, *Belfast Bulletin 8: The Churches in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Belfast Workers Research Unit, 1980), 24–27.

23 Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), “Cullingtree Road Redevelopment Scheme,” file no. LA/7/3/E/13/15.

representation of these spaces, Nangle explored patterns of everyday life that were bound by sociability. Set against the backdrop of Victorian terraced streets, children were photographed in embrace as they playfully posed for the camera, their unity carrying a connotation of the community, cohesion, and sociability that has often been seen as central to working-class life.<sup>24</sup> Elements of community and cohesion were reflected in Nangle's emphasis on the physical composition of the street. The patterns of the intricate brickwork of the houses, the concrete of the pavement, and the cobblestones of the road were captured and displayed as material elements that were woven into the very fabric of the community. Nangle depicted the terraced street as a symbol of collectivism and strength while parallel redevelopments altered and mutated the urban landscape. His work represents a particular way of seeing the Lower Falls that was rooted in the past. For Joe Moran, visual representations of post-war street scenes curated a sense of the "re-enchancement of ordinary life after wartime and an anticipatory nostalgia about the world that would be swept away by post-war reconstruction."<sup>25</sup> The nostalgia generated from Nangle's photographs of a lost world can similarly be regarded as anticipatory; but it is also provocative. The photographs bring the past into conversation with both the present and future as they ask us to consider what the impact of redevelopment will mean in terms of the material and symbolic reshaping of working-class identities within communities that experienced de-industrialization.<sup>26</sup>

In *View of Pound Loney, Lower Falls* (1974) (fig. 8.2), Nangle explores the theme of a community in transition. The receding perspective of the pavement and terraced houses draws the eye deeper into the composition and directs us towards a factory chimney. The eye then lingers on the two-storey factory building. The photograph is dynamic with the repetition of the windows curating a sense of rhythm that is reinforced by the rise and fall of the size of the buildings. Nangle's use of light is soft, yet it provides clarity, particularly in the foreground. The material composition of the street is the focus, leading our eye to the derelict factory building with its visibly broken windows. Opposite the factory, small cement bollards line the street. They direct our gaze towards an anonymous cement structure behind which a car's headlight is just visible.

24 Stephen Brooke, "Revisiting Southam Street: Class, Generation, Gender, and Race in the Photography of Roger Mayne," *Journal of British Studies* 53, no. 2 (2014): 453–96, 469.

25 Joe Moran, "Imagining the Street in Post-war Britain," *Urban History* 39, no. 1 (2012): 166–86, 69.

26 Tim Strangleman, Eric Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon, "Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 7–22, 14.



Figure 8.2: Martin Nangle, *View of Pound Loney, Lower Falls*, 1974. Source: Ulster Museum BELUM. W2016.20.75.

The photograph presents the industrial street as a palimpsest in which meaning is layered materially on and through buildings. Graffiti decorates the render which has crumbled in places to reveal the original brickwork beneath. The slogan on the factory wall reads “O’Kane for Smithfield,” a reference to the election campaign of Kitty O’Kane who ran for the Belfast West seat for the republican and socialist Republican Clubs party in the 1974 General Election.<sup>27</sup> The factory building with the chimney was the Durham Street Weaving Company located on Cullingtree Road. The area was designated in 1964 for slum clearance and the construction of an urban motorway.<sup>28</sup> In 1965, Belfast City Council agreed to exempt part of the building from the redevelopment proposals as the factory was still in full

27 Republican Clubs was the party name given to Official Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland to circumvent the ban placed on fielding candidates which was introduced under the Emergency Powers Act (Northern Ireland) (1964) due to the party’s association with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Gerry Fitt of the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) won the seat with 21,821 votes with Kitty O’Kane polling third with 3547 votes. See: Ulster University, CAIN Archive (Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland), Westminster General Election (Northern Ireland), Thursday October 10, 1974, “Summary of Results,” accessed September 25, 2022, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/election/rw1974b.htm>.

28 Examination of architect’s drawings held at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI D2202/6/2) indicate the building was the Durham Street Weaving Company due to the positioning of buildings and the chimney relative to the street. Confirmed by photographs taken by the Department for the Environment in 1977 (PRONI D/4263/A/5).

production.<sup>29</sup> The factory employed several hundred workers from the Lower Falls area, having occupied the premises for over seventy years.<sup>30</sup> In December 1966 a fire destroyed a block of the factory, resulting in the end of production in 1968.<sup>31</sup> The factory building remained for several years as the surrounding area was redeveloped and eventually became derelict. Nangle's photograph documents the building's transition from an icon of industrial production and employment to one of ruin on its way to industrial relic.

The criticality of Nangle's images can better be understood by turning to Svetlana Boym's distinction between two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia trades with elements of truth and tradition as it "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home."<sup>32</sup> Reflective nostalgia instead challenges notions of absolute truth as it critically engages aspects of the past with those of the present. Nangle's photograph of the former mill can be regarded as a memento of a lost world as it engages with a "nostalgia for the world of mills and cobbled streets, and for the communities and community spirit that sustained them."<sup>33</sup> But the image puts nostalgia to work as it also captures themes of absence and decline. The photograph engages with the embodied realities of industrial decline and redevelopment through the depiction of absence which is manifest in the lack of human activity in the image and the focus on the derelict building of the factory. Paradoxically, it is the absence of social actors and activity that mobilizes a critical nostalgia. It provokes a knowledgeable viewer to consider what the community used to be like before de-industrialization took hold. It is through absence that we consider not only the legacies of industrial closure, but the existence of industrial production, as well.

Factories like the Durham Street Weaving Company were often the centre of working-class life in areas such as the Lower Falls. Writing in a community publication in 1983, for example, the social activist Geraldine McAteer noted

29 PRONI, "Letter from the Town Clerk of Belfast City Council to G. L. Maclaine and Co Solicitors of Durham Street Weaving Company Dated January 1, 1965," ref LA/7/3/E/13/15.

30 PRONI, "Letter from G. L. Maclaine and Co Solicitors of the Durham Street Weaving Company to Belfast City Council dated September 17, 1964," ref LA/7/3/E/13/15.

31 "Linen Factory Guttled in Big Blaze." *The Newsletter*, December 19, 1966: 5; closure of the Durham Street Weaving Company given as 1968 by Sam Crooks, a former worker who was interviewed as part of the Ulster Museum's "Living Linen Project" (HOYFM.R2000.10), accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.nmni.com/collections/history/sound-and-visual-media-archives/living-linen/hoyfmr200010>.

32 Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," 13.

33 Chris Waters, "Representations of Everyday Life: L. S. Lowry and the Landscape of Memory in Postwar Britain." *Representations*, no. 65 (1999): 121–50, 135.

that for the men and women employed by local factories and mills in the Lower Falls, “[the factories] were as much a way of life as a place of work.”<sup>34</sup> The Durham Street Weaving Company was one casualty among many as de-industrialization and redevelopment reshaped the Lower Falls in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>35</sup> In February 1967, for example, *The Newsletter* reported that motorway construction caused the relocation of major local industries such as the J.J. McKeown iron foundry on Grosvenor Road.<sup>36</sup> Nangle’s images make sense within this context of industrial decline and spatial reconfiguration of de-industrialized urban spaces as they represent the survival of industrial memory, community histories, and collective experiences during periods of decline and ruination.<sup>37</sup> Nangle’s photographs of industrial buildings such as the Durham Street Weaving Company represent a rich industrial heritage that was threatened with erasure, both materially and from the memory of the community. By bringing the past into conversation with the present, its promotion could be used to empower the histories of a community that experienced economic, social, political, and cultural ruptures to its sense of self following de-industrialization.

By 1974, the Lower Falls community was displaced, and redevelopment continued to disrupt the physical and social landscape of the area. There is a visible tension in Nangle’s photographs between landscapes of decline and the spaces that people once used.<sup>38</sup> It is a temporal concern that provokes a critical engagement, asking us to consider both the past and the present, and reflect on the long-term impact of redevelopment on former industrially defined communities. Nangle’s photographs of everyday spaces in the Lower Falls negotiate the temporal plane. They trigger critical approaches to understanding the area that reflexively traverses the past, present, and future. As a result, the images challenge us to consider how the reshaping of cities impacted working-class communities materially and socially. As Stefan Berger has noted, “deindustrialization has threatened, in particular, working-class communities with poverty, marginalization, and a sense

34 Geraldine McAteer, *Down the Falls* (Belfast: Falls Community Council, 1983), 24.

35 Northern Ireland Ministry of Development, *Belfast Urban Area Plan: Statement by the Ministry of Development* (Belfast: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1973); Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, *Belfast Urban Area Plan: Further Statement* (Belfast: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1975).

36 “Firms Will Have to Get Ready for Flit,” *The Newsletter*, February 8, 1967, 7.

37 Alice Mah, “Memory, Uncertainty and Industrial Ruination: Walker Riverside, Newcastle upon Tyne,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): 398–413, 398.

38 Steven High and David Lewis, eds., *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 4.

of being thrown onto the garbage heap of history.”<sup>39</sup> In this vein, Nangle’s photographs help to develop the history of the area through the curation of alternative historical narratives of the Lower Falls that explore both industrialism *and* decline.

### Documenting the Divis Estate

Nangle’s use of critical nostalgia to empower the industrial and social histories of the Lower Falls community makes sense when understood within the context of redevelopment. Slum clearance of the area began in 1964 and culminated with the construction of the Divis Estate in 1968. The 14-acre housing estate consisted of twelve interlinked deck-access blocks, eleven of which were seven and eight storeys high and one nineteen. Each block had balconies and walkways connecting 850 flats and was designed to house approximately 2400 people in units with two to five bedrooms. However, the estate soon displayed significant defects following completion, including structural issues, inadequate facilities, and poor management.<sup>40</sup> Residents of the Lower Falls quickly became critical of the redevelopment process and the poor quality and design of the new Divis Estate. From as early as 1971—a mere three years after the first block of flats opened—the estate was characterized by the press as a “slum.”<sup>41</sup> In 1972, the first residents’ association was created to voice the concerns of the Divis community. Campaigns by residents’ groups such as the Lower Falls Residents Association continued to be highly visible throughout the 1970s and 1980s. They campaigned for the demolition of Divis and vociferously argued that the estate did little to alleviate the housing issues of the area and described it as nothing but a “white elephant.”<sup>42</sup>

The long-term effects of de-industrialization were manifest in the wider social problems affecting the area. The community suffered from multiple deprivations which were worsened by the demographic profile of the area. In comparison to adjacent neighbourhoods such as the Shankill, the Lower Falls had a younger and less skilled population, a higher proportion of households with dependent children, and more single-parent families.<sup>43</sup> The

39 Stefan Berger, *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 2.

40 “How the People of the Falls Were Given New Slums for Old,” *The Irish Press*, April 15, 1971: 8.

41 “How the People of the Falls Were Given New Slums for Old.”

42 “Loyalists Save Sandy Row,” *The Irish Press*, June 28, 1974: 6.

43 Belfast Areas of Special Social Need Team, *Belfast Areas of Special Social Need: Report by Project Team* (Belfast: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1977), 47.

Lower Falls had a population which was younger and responsible for more children. Yet, the area lacked support in terms of childcare as there were not enough places in nurseries or pre-school playgroups, thus impacting the ability of women to engage in employment.<sup>44</sup> In terms of housing, the Belfast Areas of Special Social Need Report (1976) found that the Lower Falls was affected less by issues relating to the age and condition of properties, than by the negative social effects of redevelopment. Of the households surveyed within the Divis Flats that year, 58 per cent of people indicated that they wished to move.<sup>45</sup> The report found that residents felt that “the way redevelopment was implemented was a cause of extended family and community breakdown.”<sup>46</sup>

The redevelopment of the Lower Falls was seen to contribute to an increase in stigmatization of the area due to vandalism and the poor environment of the Divis complex, understood as a physical manifestation of social disadvantage and deprivation. The loss of industry and unemployment coupled with redevelopment were issues that caused major economic and social change in the area. These effects disrupted, redefined, and reconfigured the community more generally, resulting in its social and economic marginalization. Nangle captured areas of the Lower Falls before redevelopment mutated the physical and social landscape. Through photographic representation, the history, values, and past experiences of the community were mobilized and safeguarded. By visualizing the past in the present, Nangle’s critical nostalgia was empowering; the photographs represented narratives of industry and community that challenged contemporary stigmatizing representations.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Nangle captured the mounting tension that emerged between the Belfast Trust’s modernist vision of redevelopment and the local community that it was designed to serve. In *McDonnell Street off Grosvenor Road, with Spires of St Peter’s to Rear* (1976) (fig. 8.3) for instance, the remnants of once thriving streets are visible in the foreground while the multi-storey, high-rise flats of the Divis Estate are looming in the background, enmeshed around the twin spires of St Peter’s Cathedral. In the foreground, a lone figure stands on a street corner opposite WM O’Neill, a butcher’s shop, which occupied the ground floor of a gable-end terraced house. Behind it, a patch of waste ground is littered with debris. Next to that, a few terraced houses can

44 Belfast Areas of Special Social Need Team, *Report by Project Team*, 50–51.

45 Belfast Areas of Special Social Need Team, *Report by Project Team*, 59.

46 Belfast Areas of Special Social Need Team, *Report by Project Team*, 49.



Figure 8.3: Martin Nangle, *McDonnell Street off Grosvenor Road, with Spires of St Peter's to Rear* (described as Pound Loney in print description), 1976. Source: Ulster Museum BELUM.W2016.20.122.

be seen. The use of light and shadow reinforces the contrast between the tradition of these terraced streets and the modernity of the new flat complex designed to replace them. The old, terraced streets are shrouded in shadow while the flats are brightly illuminated in the background. The photograph places an emphasis on time and space and the tension between modernity and tradition, the past and the present. Absence is, once again, generated through Nangle's focus on architecture rather than human activity.

In the bottom-left of the photograph, a lone figure stands in the shadows of the urban landscape. The figure appears to be female and is positioned at the edge of the street, almost hidden from view. The lack of visual clarity afforded to her undermines the active role that women played in the social world of the street and community. Stephen Brooke, in his discussion of Roger Mayne's photographs of street life in London in the 1950s, has argued that women were presented by Mayne as the protagonists of street life: "walking, shopping, minding children, chatting, mixing with men, standing on the steps observing the street, and playing games."<sup>47</sup> Before de-industrialization and redevelopment reconfigured the social and economic landscape, women were extremely active and visible on the streets of the

47 Brooke, "Revisiting Southam Street," 483.



Lower Falls in their roles as workers, consumers, caregivers, and friends.<sup>48</sup> In Nangle's photograph, the woman does indeed stand on the street, but there is nothing to observe. The street is empty. Nangle uses absence to speak of the disappearance of the traditional working-class street and the elements of community and sociability that sustained it. The image explores the role of the working-class street as a complex site of contestation, including the tension between traditional visualities of industrial communities and the emergence of the post-industrial estate. The image acts as an indictment. Nangle attributes blame for the disappearance of a community to the construction of the estate which is visualized through the use of light: the old streets are dominated by shadow while the flats are brightly illuminated in contrast.

In *Man Driving Pony and Cart Past Bricked-Up Houses on Clonfadden Crescent Near Divis Flats* (1982) (fig. 8.4) a horse and cart is driven by a man in front of a row of mostly dilapidated and bricked-up terraced houses. Only one house at the end of the row appears to be inhabited and is highlighted by the tonal contrast of the painted masonry. The house is brightly illuminated and appears well-kept in obvious juxtaposition with the decay of the other houses. The curvature of the pavement guides the eye deeper into the composition where we settle on the multi-storey building. The image is textured with the high contrast of the architecture, revealing the broken tiles and flaking paint of the dilapidated houses in intricate detail. The buildings dominate the photograph; however, our eye is drawn to the horse and cart at its centre. The photograph speaks of the conflict between traditional aspects of community through the terraced street, horse and cart and the encroachment of the multi-storey estate. Nangle visualizes the temporal and spatial transformation of the area through the juxtaposition of symbolic elements of the past with those of the present. Used to collect rags in working-class areas, the horse and cart was imbued with social and cultural meaning as a symbol of class distinction that represented a particular way of working-class urban life.

When placed alongside representations of the post-industrial city, Nangle opened critical dialogue that asked the viewer to consider how redevelopment and change over time had impacted the community. The past is propelled forward and brought into opposition with the present as a means of critique. Nangle suggests that traditional and distinctive elements of the working-class community were in decline and under threat with the rise

48 McAteer, *Down the Falls*, 6–39.



Figure 8.4: Martin Nangle, *Man Driving Pony and Cart Past Bricked-Up Houses on Clonfadden Crescent Near Divis Flats*, 1982. Source: Ulster Museum BELUM.W2016.20.218.

of the multi-storey and its associated connotations of isolation, anti-social behaviour, and deprivation.

As Nangle documented the Lower Falls in the 1980s, several local community groups were similarly negotiating the effects that redevelopment was having on contemporary and historical understandings of the area. Like Nangle, they employed nostalgia critically to mobilize histories of the area, empower the community, and actively critique the effects of redevelopment and structural change. In 1982, the Divis Community Arts Project (DCAP) published a collection of short stories, personal testimonies, illustrations, and photographs created by residents of the Divis Estate. The publication was a damning insight into the social conditions faced by residents and included testimony from residents that drew on icons of past community such as the horse and cart photographed by Nangle:

[T]he vast majority of the occupants are now living in more or less the same place as their families lived many years ago. The only difference is they no longer have a house, or a home, but somewhere to stay. No more the bellow of the rag 'n' bone man as he slowly came down the street, with his horse and cart. No more the clatter of dogs near Barney Hughes' mill

[...] All fragments, but characteristic fragments of the real Pound Loney now to be replaced by the infamous Divis flats.<sup>49</sup>

In the testimony, there are echoes of communal solidarity in the evocation of memories of a past home that existed before de-industrialization and redevelopment. The replication of icons of the past such as the ragman indicates the social salience of such representations.<sup>50</sup> Nangle's image of the ragman was not widely circulated in the 1980s and was only exhibited once in 1988. However, the ragman did circulate widely as an icon of working-class communities in Belfast within community activism and in community publications. In 1983, the Falls Community Council published the booklet *Down the Falls*, which examined the iconicity of the ragman through the lens of community cooperation and collectivism: "the street life of the old Falls, the neighbourliness and sharing is what most of the ex-residents miss most [...] Adding to the life of any street was the rag-man who came round with his horse and cart once a week, to trade rags for cups or balloons."<sup>51</sup> Nangle's engagement with cultural and social icons like the ragman may suggest that he tapped into established narratives and iconographies not only to identify the community as working class, but to strengthen its identity and contribute to contemporaneous discourse.

The curation of cultural representations of the older working-class community through symbols of the past was an emotive response that contested stigmatizing representations of the post-industrial community seen with the decline of Divis.<sup>52</sup> As Stefan Berger has argued, icons of the past—such as the ragman—act as "memory agents" that strengthen working-class community narratives in danger of being silenced.<sup>53</sup> Nostalgic emotion then becomes an important vehicle that empowers communities to protect their history, values, and experience of the past and resist stigmatizing ideas surrounding class, religion, politics, and social life.<sup>54</sup> Nostalgia can

49 Divis Community Arts Project, *No Place for a Dog: A Selection of Short Stories, Poems and Illustrations by the People of Divis Flats, Belfast* (Belfast: Divis Community Arts Project, 1982), 5–6.

50 Despite the similarities of content, there is no evidence to suggest that either Nangle or the DCAP were directly influenced by one another's work.

51 McAteer, *Down the Falls*, 11.

52 Ben Jones, "Uses of Nostalgia," *Cultural and Social History* 7 no.3 (2010): 366–67.

53 Berger, *Constructing Industrial Pasts*, 1.

54 Berger, *Constructing Industrial Pasts*, 2; Berger, "Industrial Heritage," 40; Smith and Campbell, "Nostalgia for the Future," 617.

therefore be seen as a response that is capable of empowering socially and economically marginalized communities as they grapple with the long-term effects of structural change.

## Conclusion

Visual historians read history against the grain. When we look at images, we do so with a historical and intellectual reflexivity that considers how photographs engage with people, other images, processes, and systems of understanding. Photographs are problematic, disruptive, untrustworthy, and must be interrogated. We must examine what photographs reveal, and also, pay close attention to the gaps and silences created by what is not visible. We can use Nangle's photographs critically to help navigate the silences and uncover alternative histories and legacies of de-industrialization. By reinserting photographs within narratives of structural change we can examine their multiple, ambiguous, and heterogenous meanings. In turn, this allows us to move beyond the aestheticization and fetishization of former industrial spaces and communities.

Scholars of de-industrialization have been critical of the nostalgia generated by images of former industrial sites and communities and have often focused on the photographers' tendency to depopulate such spaces.<sup>55</sup> However, Nangle's photographs of everyday spaces of community like the street and factory can be seen as an engagement with the embodied realities of industrial closure and decline through his depiction of absence. Nangle captured the social legacy that industrial closure left on the community of the Lower Falls which was visualized through his focus on the built environment and lack of human activity. It is the absence of social actors and activity that mobilizes a critical nostalgia as the knowing viewer recalls what the community of the Lower Falls was like before de-industrialization. Nangle documented the stratigraphy of the post-industrial city through shadow, texture, and line. From a site of industry to one of decline and redevelopment, Nangle explored the material and historical layers of the Lower Falls through time.<sup>56</sup> For the visual historian, the exposure of these layers makes alternative narratives of Belfast visible as we explore histories of the city that were otherwise concealed.

55 Strangleman, "Smokestack Nostalgia," 25.

56 Roy Willis, "Martin Nangle, Art Advice Belfast 23 May – 11 June," *Circa Art Magazine* no.41 (1988): 31.

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## About the Author

**Sinead Burns** is a History PhD candidate at the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen’s University Belfast. Her thesis uses a visual and oral history approach to focus on the impact of de-industrialization, conflict, and social upheaval on photographic representations of West Belfast between 1969 and 2005.



# Section Four

Images in Exhibition



## 9. Personal Traces in the Soviet Industrial Aftermath

Pavel Otdelnov's *Promzona* and Haim Sokol's *Paper Memory* Exhibitions in Moscow

*Anna Arutyunyan and Andrey Egorov*

### Abstract

The chapter explores distinct creative approaches to Soviet industrial heritage taken by Pavel Otdelnov and Haim Sokol in their respective research-based exhibitions “Promzona” (2019) and “Paper Memory” (2017). Otdelnov’s large museum show narrated the detail-rich story of his industrial hometown of Dzerzhinsk while focusing on the modern-day ruins of its former chemical plants. Contrastingly, Sokol’s was an intimate archival installation, staged on the premises of a factory of technical paper in Moscow and dedicated to the people employed there in the 1930s–1950s. As we demonstrate by a critical ekphrasis of the projects, the artists assume divergent positions regarding the relationship between the documentary and the poetical, the ethical and the aesthetic, the notion of testimony, and crucially, the philosophy of history.

**Keywords:** USSR; Russia; archive; ruins; testimony; ecology; working class; painting; installation

The Soviet industrial heritage that continues to significantly define the contours of contemporary Russian economy also haunts the collective memory and creative imagination of the country. This retrospective trend found a culminating expression in one of the longest-running and most remarkable cultural projects in Russia—the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art. Launched in 2010, it has taken place in the city of Ekaterinburg, its vicinity, and other towns of the wider Ural region. Already

a major metallurgical centre since the early eighteenth century, in the Soviet era the region was transformed into an industrial powerhouse with heavy machine building among its primary sectors. Despite the economic downturn of the 1990s, it still functions today. The Biennial's exhibitions, artistic residencies, and public events inhabit both the derelict and the still active industrial infrastructure of the Urals, thus turning the local economy into an internationally recognizable cultural brand. The works and ideas of artists, curators, and researchers, brought together with the material production of goods, celebrate the "the industry of meanings."<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that this example of cultural gentrification, along with numerous cases of converting imperial and Soviet factories' into leisure, office, and service facilities in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and elsewhere, agrees with the expansionist logic of the post-industrial turn.

Still, Russia essentially remains a country of industry, with a significant part of its gross domestic product provided by the extraction, processing, and exporting of natural resources, largely dependent on Soviet-period developments and production sites. While this insufficiently diversified economy has been the constant target of criticism, the cultural mainstream of the country in the decades after 1991, has been heavily influenced by the post-industrial social imaginary. A consumerism-oriented mindset has marginalized important issues of labour relations and conditions. Largely left out of the discussion at the time were the problems of the working class with a sizeable proportion of migrants from the post-Soviet republics, the life of the old and new industrial settlements, as well as their ecological landscapes and histories.

Throughout the Soviet decades, celebrations of massive industrialization and the heroics of proletarian labour permeated state ideology and its visual representations. Artists of different generations have tackled the subject in individual works and monumental ensembles: from the painters of the OST group, the first to capture the dynamics of post-revolutionary modernization, to the "ideologically correct" socialist realists, and the exponents of the inventive left-wing of official art in the 1960–1980s. After years of almost complete neglect in the 1990s and early 2000s (marked by the devastating privatization and bankruptcy of multiple enterprises), the new breed of contemporary artists in Russia once again turned to the industrial. Notably, they prefer to focus not on its current instantiations,

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the authors.

"The Industry of Meanings" was the theme of the 2nd Ural Industrial Biennial in 2012. It has later become a key trope in the Biennial's self-conceptualizing and promotion.

but on the relics of its past. Here, in the former “country of workers and peasants,” the prevailing obsession with twentieth-century history and its industrial legacy signals the vital importance of this deeply transformative, complex period—grandiose and idealistic, troubling and tragic—for one’s self-understanding in the now. Like an “incomplete gestalt,” it is not yet solidified in history books, but remains a proximate, permanent, and highly polemical point of reference in public and private discourse in Russia and the former Soviet republics.

Undertakings like the Ural Biennial over its six editions have successfully established a system for creating artworks within the conceptual framework of the globalized culture industry. However, it could be claimed that the most important recent artistic statements in Russia inspired by the history of industrial production were not defined by a commission *per se*, be it curatorial, social, or state-driven. Rather, the main impulse for these works has been personal, based on a biographical or even a deep psychological relationship with the subject. In this chapter, we showcase two such projects—*Promzona* by Pavel Otdelnov (2019) and *Paper Memory* by Haim Sokol (2017). Elaborate in their visual presentation, they draw on solid research and possess a strong ethical undercurrent, responding, each in its own way, to the history of Soviet industry. It is important for us to indicate how *Promzona* and *Paper Memory*, carried out independently of the Ural Biennial, reveal the uneven and unstable relationship between the post-industrial imperative and the individual experience of the still-industrial present.<sup>2</sup>

### The Ruins of *Promzona*

Pavel Otdelnov’s *Promzona* (Industrial Zone) can be considered the most ambitious and celebrated art project dealing with Soviet industrial legacy.<sup>3</sup> The artist, born in 1979 and trained as a painter in a rigorous academic system, has established his reputation with large-scale austere

2 Several of Otdelnov’s works that would eventually be part of *Promzona* were shown in the main exhibition of the 4th Ural Biennial, entitled “New Literacy” (2017, curated by Joan Ribas).

3 Initiated in 2015, the project went through chapter-like iterations at different venues. The final exhibition took place January 29–March 10, 2019, at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art (at the museum’s Petrovka, 25 location), curated by Daria Kamyshnikova. It was accompanied by a bilingual Russian-English catalogue: Pavel Otdelnov, *Promzona* (Moscow: Triumph Gallery, 2019). Documentation of the project is available online: accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.promzona.site>.

post-industrial landscapes capturing nondescript liminal zones of the Russian urban environment. Otdelnov's are sweeping visions of late socialist residential blocks, bland motorways and shopping malls, garage cooperatives and dump sites, thermal power station towers and electricity transmission lines—all bringing to mind Marc Augé's compelling notion of “non-places” as impersonal and estranged modern areas of transience.<sup>4</sup>

Extending and personalizing this sphere of inquiry, in *Promzona* Otdelnov chose to concentrate on the shattered remains of a giant cluster of chemical plants in his hometown of Dzerzhinsk near Nizhny Novgorod, which, since the late 1930s, has been the hotbed of the Soviet chemical industry.<sup>5</sup> Many factories were initially used for military purposes, and after the war with Nazi Germany, they started to produce materials for civil industrial branches: fertilizers, herbicides, the infamous DDT insecticide, plexiglass, caprolactam, and acetone, to name a few. Beginning with the artist's grandmother moving to the town from a village before the outbreak of the war in 1941, three generations of his family have lived there, working at several factories, including secret ones and those with highly hazardous production. By animating the memory of this industrial town, delving into its various locations and stories, Otdelnov conveys the vicissitudes of the big historical narrative through the lens of private microhistory.

*Promzona* was presented as a vast research-based installation that occupied nine rooms and a connecting corridor at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art (MMOMA) in 2019. It included a wide range of media: from paintings depicting modern-day, dilapidated plant infrastructure or referencing old newspaper images to photographs and videos of the area, found objects, textual commentary, and more. The diverse material of the exhibition was organized into six thematic sections—“Traces,” “Ruins,” “Wall of Fame,” “Museum,” “Sand,” and “Cinema Hall,” each highlighting different facets and crucial nodes of Otdelnov's story. This structure evoked a memorial display or a reimagined regional studies' museum, with all artefacts on view—including the works of art—functioning as evidentiary exhibits, or testimonies of the everyday.<sup>6</sup> This museological concept was supported by elements of exhibition design that referenced the old industrial aesthetic,

4 Marc Augé, *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

5 Dzerzhinsk, named after Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877–1926), the first director of the Soviet state security organization VChK, was granted city status in 1930. The chemical and explosives production began in the settlements of the area during the First World War.

6 As Otdelnov states, a part of the project is conceived “as a quasi-museum, a regional studies museum, which I would have liked to create. Its exhibits would never end up in official

such as the red stencilled letters of the section titles, and the muddy grey painted dado.

The core “Museum” section strongly defined the main semantic vectors of the entire project, mapping prominent locations, introducing characters and themes. It presented the results of the artist’s field research, conducted around the abandoned area of the former Voroshilovsky workers’ settlement in the eastern industrial zone of Dzerzhinsk where many of Otdelnov’s relatives were born.<sup>7</sup> Several separate, though interconnected, local topics were recounted through documentary images and objects in a darkened multimedia space.

Two large black-and-white photographic lightbox collages showed close-up views of strange pits in the woods—originally brick cellars of the settlement’s once existing living barracks, also doubling as emergency shelters. The snowy holes in the ground, varying in shape and size, constitute a mournful enumerative “catalogue” of natural monuments to vanished human presence. In the accompanying film, Otdelnov and his father burn candles in the pits for their home folk, enacting a commemorative ritual that silently acknowledges and honours the ordinary working people behind big history.<sup>8</sup>

Across the room in the same section, the artist laid out an investigative story relating to the whereabouts of camps for German prisoners of war engaged in construction and hazardous production. An enlarged copy of an archival aerial photograph, taken from a German spy plane to map the industrial area, was supplemented by Otdelnov’s email correspondence with a former camp inmate by the name of Klaus Fritzsche (1923–2017). A downed Luftwaffe radio gunner, Fritzsche had written a book about his experience in Dzerzhinsk and provided the artist with necessary information.<sup>9</sup> In the two personal photographs sent by Fritzsche to the artist, he is standing in front of the same military barracks: in the first photograph from 1946, the building is still unfinished, and in the second, of 2016, it is already a ruin.

The visual and conceptual epicentre of “Museum” was a sizeable video projection on the floor. Its rhomboid shape, rounded at the corners, radiated

museums—these are small things that narrate and testify not about the victories and achievements, but about the everyday lives of the people.” Otdelnov, *Promzona*, 16 (quote in Russian).

7 Like the other barrack settlements for workers of Dzerzhinsk, Voroshilovsky was resettled in the 1960s.

8 The film, entitled *Subjects of Memory* (2016, 30 mins) contained interviews with Otdelnov’s relatives about the settlement and the factories, and was shown in a small adjoining room.

9 Klaus Fritzsche, *Das Ziel—Überleben: Sechs Jahre hinter Stacheldraht* (Zweibrücken: VDM, 2001).

in a gloomy space with irregular swirls of colour, resembling an abstract pictorial surface. In fact, it was a satellite image of the largest, quite notorious sludge pond in Dzerzhinsk—the White Sea. The pond began to fill in 1973 and has gradually amassed millions of tons of toxic waste, even though there were and still are dachas and villages in its environs, near the Oka River, where Otdelnov spent his childhood. Likening this formation to the sentient Solaris Ocean, the artist was at once fascinated by its intricately congealed natural pattern, and anxious to disclose its heavy ecological impact.<sup>10</sup> The horizontally projected “carpet image,” although framed by a neat border that prevented the visitor from walking across, had an immersive quality to it, creating an illusion of a reservoir. A strong visual attractor, the projection generated a tension between aesthetic potency and a sense of discomfort and danger.

The location of the White Sea was indicated in the extensive chalk mural depicting a modern-day schematic map of the eastern industrial zone, with many handwritten names of private enterprises occupying the previously state-owned industrial conglomerate. The map also contained references to various landfill sites and waste dumps, including another important toponym of the story, the illegal Black Hole—among the most polluted funnel sink reservoirs on earth. The artist demonstrated how past production still deeply influences the natural and social environment of the area. Once set in motion, the chemical reactions persist: if not in the factory furnaces anymore, then in the soil and the atmosphere.

Enriching the range of display devices, this section was supplemented by natural objects and substances that triggered sensorial and affective associations. For example, graphite rods utilized in the production of chlorine to absorb various toxicants were placed in a vitrine. From the 1960s to the 1990s, such decommissioned graphite waste was often incautiously repurposed by the workers’ families for home heating as it burned much longer than coal. Meanwhile, three flasks on a shelf contained specific chemical odours that once permeated hazardous production sites, and today, fill the air near the waste dumps. The artist pushed the boundaries of representation by inviting the visitor to examine and inhale the toxicants in safe portions, in the comfort of the museum space. He resorted to extreme arguments expecting to provoke an immediate emotional response and judgement.

In the “Museum” section, Otdelnov explicitly articulated his own ethical standpoint, not only by means of various “evidentiary exhibits” like

10 An attempt to recultivate the sludge pond (70 hectares in area and 14 metres deep) in 2018–20 was confirmed to be unsatisfactory.



documents and objects, but in many accompanying texts that combined factual data with occasional family recollection. Striving to outline the distressing situation in Dzerzhinsk in the past and the present the artist guided us through every meaningful detail as a competent, reliable narrator. This rational, documentary mode was followed further in the exhibition. However, with the emphasis on paintings, subsequent sections demonstrated a more distanced, creatively ambivalent approach to sources.

In the paintings from the “Wall of Fame” and “Traces” sections, Otdelnov critically reinterpreted archival material provided by old municipal and factory newspapers.<sup>11</sup> Thirty-seven small-scale monochrome portraits of the so-called Stakhanovite, or model workers, constituted an imaginary wall of fame. The male and female likenesses, including the artist’s own grandmother, were copied from newspaper photographs, ranging from the rigidly staged, frontal and heavily retouched studio shots of the 1930s to the more natural, dynamic workplace situations of the 1970s. By scrutinizing their original iconography, the representational conventions of each decade, the artist demonstrated the evolution of a worker-hero image constructed by the Soviet press. In this intrinsically anachronistic collective portrait of several generations, seen through the alienating filters of twentieth-century photography and augmented by means of contemporary painting, Otdelnov detected and exaggerated the mechanisms of socialist pictorial ideology. As a result, every person, bearing a grotesquely idealist or nonchalantly schematic expression, became a critical comment on a type: the naïve and obedient *Homo sovieticus*.<sup>12</sup>

Staging a suspenseful environment, the artist arranged his detached, ghostly images of workers against the black background resembling not even a wall of fame, but a columbarium. Furthermore, he correlated the portraits with actual findings from the Dzerzhinsk industrial zone—the uncanny piles of old, decommissioned gas masks. Shown in a theatrical play of light and shade on the floor, these skull-like objects served as palpable evidence, substituting for people long gone and, figuratively, turned to trash in the cemetery of history.

11 Both series, differently utilizing archival photographs and demonstrating the dialectics of memory and alienation, resonate with Siegfried Kracauer’s observations in his classic 1927 essay “Photography.” See Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 421–36.

12 The Latin neologism *Homo sovieticus* became a popular sociological construct after the publication of the emigreé philosopher Alexander Zinoviev’s eponymous autobiographical novel: Alexander Zinoviev, *Homo sovieticus*, trans. Charles Janson (London: V. Gollancz, 1985). The book satirically describes the mental habits, personal traits, and behavioural patterns of ex-Soviet types living in West Germany—including the author himself.

In “Traces,” Otdelnov’s work with archival photography acquired a different dimension. The illustrations from factory newspapers and documentary pictures of the 1960s and 1970s representing official workers’ assemblies and demonstrations, samples of factory agitprop, as well as edifying cases of mismanagement and neglect, became the basis for large-format canvases that employed the stylistic traits of monochrome screen printing. The brownish “dust” of separate dots that imitate the raster pattern (an apparent nod to pop art) almost deconstructs the very legibility of the source images, at times rendering them incomprehensible. The entropy, which the artist saw increasing in the scenes captured in the old snapshots of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years—prophecies of the factories’ future demise—dissolves both the physical world and collective memory. This destructive process attains a “matter of fact” expression in a formal effect of semi-erasure.

One of the key paintings of this series presents a diffuse vision of the debris of the “Caprolactam” facility left after an immense gas-leak explosion that took place on February 12, 1960. This tragic incident, which claimed the lives of an entire shift of twenty-four people, never appeared in the press. In the painting, Otdelnov tried to restore historical justice: an unpublished archival picture was turned into a newspaper-style image that “looks like” it was once in fact printed. In two other big canvases one saw an “archival” and a present day view of an elevated passageway meant to connect factory facilities. The first showed the construction partially covered with official motivational banners, looking, in the dotted haze, not unlike capitalist billboards.<sup>13</sup> However, departing from the source, Otdelnov completely dissolved its right half in a white void. Thus, he echoed the second depiction—an abandoned industrial wreck that today in fact leads nowhere. The artist manipulated the original archival image as if to effectuate a retroactive prediction of the impending finale of the Soviet utopian dream.

The poetics of decay takes centre stage in another series of paintings accordingly titled “Ruins.” Horizontally oriented canvases in either widescreen panoramic, or “telescopic” perspectives feature outside and interior views of depopulated and dilapidated industrial edifices. Otdelnov seems to relish cataloguing grandiose remains, often glimpsed from a dramatizing low vantage point. The vast rectangular facility blocks and basilical structures, towers and pipes, massive vaults and coffered ceilings, partially painted

13 In this “archival” painting, an echo of Roy Lichtenstein’s signature silkscreen raster matrix is most poignant. Otdelnov chose to use the inherently ironic pop art device to disassemble the illusory idiom of official propaganda.

walls and pylons clearly reference the imperial pathos of Ancient Roman archetypes. Eroded and forlorn, those once imperishable assemblages of reinforced concrete, metal, brick, and glass, appear as heroically amplified fetishes of decay on a grand scale.

Otdelnov captured these man-made structures in the state of gradually becoming a part of the natural landscape, subsumed by the elements. This can be seen, for example, in the painting of a former herbicide production facility. The huge red stencil inscription “СЛАВА ТРУДУ И НАУКЕ” (Glory to Labour and Science) remains visible on a modernist façade punctuated by dark hollows of broken windows. Nevertheless, birch trees are already springing triumphantly over the roof. This quasi-archaeological view of the remnants of the erstwhile socialist project attests to how its idealist values of hard work and progress have become unclaimed in market economy Russia.

The reality of the former Dzerzhinsk industrial zone, at once desolate and majestic, was conveyed by Otdelnov in a distanced, objectifying optical regime akin to machine vision. It is not coincidental that his laconic, perfectly balanced compositions, with strong orthogonal lines, generalized textures, and cold dissipated lighting, remind us of digitally rendered models transmitting visual clichés of the romantic sublime. The artist’s ruins submerge the viewer into an oneiric ambience: here, time is slow, while the traumatic experience of industrial aftermath is paradoxically captivating.

In contrast to the retrospective “Wall of Fame” and “Traces,” Otdelnov’s ruins are pictures of the present that utilize stylistic traits recognizable from his other projects dedicated to urban “non-places” in Russia. This enhancing pictorial language, not realist but classicist in essence, encodes authority, triggering a spectrum of conflicting emotions: from admiration and nostalgia to fear, guilt, and resentment. Confusing time and space, Otdelnov’s post-industrial imagery shifts the local Soviet and post-Soviet dichotomy into a much broader, nonspecific intercultural context of imperial archetypes, utopic phantoms, and political mythmaking.

A significant element of the “Ruins” were stories recounted by a narrator making his full-fledged appearance in the wall texts. This was the artist’s father, Alexander Otdelnov, who had spent his entire life and career in the town, working at several plants. He proceeded from an equipment operator to, in the 1990s, founder of his own chemical factory that specialized in hair cosmetics for Western corporate brands such as Wella, Schwarzkopf, and P&G. Reproduced were several excerpts from Alexander’s professional recollections, published in Russian in a separate book in conjunction with

the exhibition.<sup>14</sup> Sharp-witted and insightful, they share many interesting flashbacks to a worker's everyday life at a late-Soviet chemical plant—sometimes reckless and funny, often tragic, but always extremely challenging.<sup>15</sup> These seemingly random episodes from the years 1973–86 complemented the austere imagery, bridging the vast gap between modern visions of deserted Dzerzhinsk factories and their vigorous past existence. Describing an environment of rough social types (often with prison background) in harmful working conditions, the author, at once an insider and a critical observer, confirms the unflattering stereotypes about Soviet proletarians as heavy drinkers, loose on discipline, and fatalistic to the bone. But equally he acknowledges his fellow workers' inventiveness, skills, and readiness to save the day. His action-filled anecdotes about people balancing between life and death are filled with sympathy. Yet, necessarily selective, they are also ruins, as fragmented as memory itself.

*Promzona* logically arrived at a meditation on the passing of time and inevitable oblivion in the "Sand" section. In one of the paintings, based on a Google Street View image, Otdelnov showed the rails of the Dzerzhinsk tramway that once connected the town with the industrial zone, but fell into decline during the 1990s and was discontinued in 2015. The ochre sand dune reclaims the former town infrastructure looking like a desert frontier right next to the apartment blocks. The other pictures touch upon the current illegal procurement of sand at the abandoned production sites and the unregulated burying of garbage and waste from the private enterprises which have sprung up in Dzerzhinsk in recent decades. The extreme ecological damage was evoked in the two final canvases. The first depicts the entry point to the Black Hole area fenced-in with barbed wire and a "danger zone" sign on the gates. The second represents the repository landfill for simazine waste, a highly hazardous herbicide, with only pressurizing concrete cubes visible on the snow-strewn ground. These frighteningly similar bleak and steppe-like landscapes invite a reading as symbols of a country "intoxicated" and traumatized by its past. They are a menacing reminder that, in fact, nothing goes away without a trace, even if it remains deeply buried and unseen.

Otdelnov painted these terrifying cases of a silent ecological catastrophe using the same "beautifying" idiom. Endowed with an advantage of being

14 Alexander Otdelnov, *Bez protivogaza ne vkhodit': Opusy iz moyey rabochey biografii* [*Do Not Enter without a Gas Mask: Opuses from My Professional Biography*] (Moscow: Triumph Gallery, 2019).

15 Several excerpts from the book translated into English can be found on the *Promzona* website, accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.promzona.site/ruins?lang=en>. See appendix 9.1.

accessible and eye-catching, his works instantly draw attention to things one would not otherwise choose to look at or acknowledge. The artist, forced to compete with the omnipresent virtual imagery of global digital platforms, discards the raw facture of reality for a carefully designed, impactful, and overwhelming visual statement.

Bringing this thrust to the limit, the exhibition narrative culminated in the “Cinema Hall” where two documentary films were projected onto the walls. Made from quadcopter footage and accompanied by dark ambient music, they showed striking panoramas of the contemporary Dzerzhinsk industrial zone from on high. The drone camera slowly scans, as if savouring, the abandoned terrain submerged in verdure or covered in sand and debris: the decaying building frames and cluttered interiors of the former factories, as well as the painterly stiffened multicoloured overflow of the many toxic waste ponds. These video-landscapes, crafted with the cinematic toolkit of the digital era—applied in blockbuster movies, real estate advertisements, or military surveillance—produce a dramatic effect of hyperreality. They imperiously imprint a post-apocalyptic vision of a bygone epoch and a country torn apart. The only inhabitant of this wasteland was a mutated form of life—the last, *post scriptum* exhibit in a vitrine, an ironic futurological mystification and perhaps a cruel allegory of the post-Soviet individual, ever adapting to survive.<sup>16</sup>

Constructing the exhibition, Otdelnov saturated his account with extensive historic and current visual references: Socialist Realism and classicist aesthetic, pop art devices and contemporary figurative painting, Andrey Tarkovsky films, and digitally rendered worlds. The intersection of polysemantic cultural vectors brings forth a generalized representation of an abandoned phantasmagoric “promzona” situated between the past that is ruined and the future that never arrived. This timeless moment, devoid of human presence and action, filled with memories, wreckage, and burial sites for toxic waste and people is a bitter epilogue that the artist is committed to deliver.

### *The Spirits of Paper Memory*

Haim Sokol’s *Paper Memory* also addressed the Soviet industrial legacy as a research-based project, offering, however, a different, even opposite,

16 The “found object” under the title *Mutant* (2017, 50 × 50 × 50 cm), a pinkish pseudo-organic lump, was displayed in the “Sand” section in a glass case filled, as claimed in the caption text, with sludge from the Dzerzhinsk White Sea, the entity’s original habitat.

approach to the subject. A compact and low-key exhibition with an intimate tone, it was not destined for a museum or art gallery, but rather took place at a private, non-commercial Centre for Creative Industries situated on the premises of the “Oktyabr” (October) Technical Paper Factory in Moscow, in existence since 1924.<sup>17</sup> The centre, called “Fabrika” (Factory), is a unique post-industrial contemporary arts complex, founded in 2005 by Asya Filippova, the director of “Oktyabr.” Exhibition and performance spaces, generally retaining their industrial appearance, are supplemented here by artist studios and residency facilities and coexist with a drastically diminished, but ongoing paper production.

Sokol’s project was carried out in the autumn of 2017, as part of the “Fabrika Studios” programme and dedicated to the factory itself or, more exactly, to its mid-twentieth-century workers.<sup>18</sup> Over three months, the artist studied the archive of the “Oktyabr” factory’s personnel department, where various documents from 1938 onwards are kept. His meticulous examination of files, official applications, memos, and orders resulted in an installation featuring poetic collages, big format *livres d’artistes*, and performative videos. The artist variously referenced and creatively interpreted archival documents, without reusing the originals. He also utilized the factory-produced paper as his material. Although Sokol, unlike Otdelnov, had no family connection to the enterprise, his preoccupation with the subject had deeply personal roots. *Paper Memory* resonated with his long-time artistic exploration of the experience of social exclusion and historical effacement, prompted by a wish to restore visibility to oppressed individuals of both the past and the present.<sup>19</sup>

Born in 1973 in Arkhangelsk in the north of Russia in a family of medics, Sokol spent his school years in Soviet Ukraine and attained his university degrees in humanities in Israel. Since the mid-2000s, he has been based in Moscow. As an autodidact artist without long-term professional art training, a migrant, and a precarious cultural worker, Sokol is particularly sensitive

17 The “Oktyabr” factory opened as a dyeing and finishing plant on the premises of a former industrial complex built in the 1870s. In 1929, it became a paper-dyeing plant, and finally, in 1941, a factory of technical paper.

18 Curated by Asya Filippova, the exhibition was on view October 26—November 30, 2017, in the “Arthaus” space of the CCI “Fabrika.” The entire *Paper Memory* project is now in the collection of Denis Khimilyayne.

19 A constant inspiration and reference for Sokol are Walter Benjamin’s ideas and metaphors of the unseen forces of history founded on the “secret agreement between past generations and the present one.” Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253–64, 253–54.

to the permanent state of exception embedded in the everyday. The artist speaks of himself as twice an alien, a Jew in Russia, and a Russian in Israel, never completely fitting-in and settling in either country. He carries the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust via his father who as a young boy fled the ghetto in Ukraine—to reunite, after a period of hiding, with his parents and Soviet partisans. Sokol faced antisemitism at school in Zhmerynka in the late 1980s, witnessed ethnic and social division in Israel in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as nationalist tensions and, more recently, the disenfranchisement of labour migrants in Russia. The shifting sense of belonging, identity and exclusion broadly characterizes his worldview and artistic practice. In his works in various media—from discarded/found objects and traced imagery to video performances, neoexpressionist paintings, and textual pieces—personal recollections, deep historical traumas, and contemporary social realities form a distinctive visual-poetic world where the mundane resonates with the allegorical.

*Paper Memory* developed Sokol's interest in marginalized labour, be it slaves in Ancient Rome or migrant workers from Central Asian countries in Russia, and his fascination with the redemptive promise of the Soviet revolutionary project. The "Fabrika" installation, created for the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution, was conceived as a tribute to the working class, which, the artist attests, not so long ago, was celebrated as the protagonist of world history, and now, has vanished from public view—most conspicuously, from the former industrial facilities revitalized as artistic hubs.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, however, Sokol did not focus on the collectivist understanding of class, but rather on specific classed individuals: men and women with unique traits, personal circumstances, and private destinies. All were defined by their subordinate and vulnerable status as factory workers bearing the hardships of the mobilization economy of the war and post-war years.

The series of thirty collages was arranged in rows on the walls of a sombre exhibition space. Each measures 42.5 × 63 cm and has the same binary structure: a technical paper specimen on the right—variously dyed, smooth or textured, blank or ornamented—is accompanied on the left by a printed poetic caption in block verse format. These texts were developed from the questionnaires preserved in the factory employees' personal files, specifically from the 1940s. Together they comprised an unpublished poetic corpus named by the artist as "Reason for Dismissal: Died."<sup>21</sup> Looking like a motley collection of paper production sample pieces, the collages were

20 The factory's name itself is a tribute to the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917.

21 See appendix 9.2 for a selection of poetic captions translated into English.

delicately framed and presented in three groups on differently painted backgrounds. Large rectangular coloured fields—yellow and green (each for nine works), and coral (for twelve works)—were used to optically harmonize the specimens of paper.

Here, Sokol found a concise formal equivalent for the double meaning of the word “paper” as both a material and a document, therefore carrying the memory of the workers’ alienated labour and identities. The “self-descriptive” captions, headed in bold simply by an employee’s profession or duties, remained true to the original spelling and style of the questionnaire answers.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, the complementing paper samples substituted for the physical presence of the individuals, but were not in fact produced by *those* people *then*. The resulting collage pairings of object and text functioned as “metonymic portraits” of unnamed workers. There are dyers, gluers, machine operators, freight handlers, joiners, and typists; Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars; non-party and Komsomol members; married, single, and widowed. Regular individuals of both genders and different ages reappear at the same place after many decades thanks to their splintered, “shimmering” linguistic traces—all caught in a liminal moment of job termination.

Sokol carefully selected bits of information gathered by the bureaucracy, such as gender, nationality, education, state of health, marital and party status, reasons for dismissal, and criminal history. Reading the repetitive officialese of thirty private cases, fashioned in the vein of concrete poetry, the visitor confronted the harsh social and working realities of the period. The human broke through the impersonal, matter-of-fact wording. One discovered that the factory staff comprised mainly women, including those doing what would traditionally be considered men’s work such as coal-heaving, guarding, driving. Some of the women were mothers of infants just a few months old, some were married to men serving in the Red Army or had been widowed. Many workers were illiterate or with minimal schooling. It was also apparent that recent peasants or denizens of provincial settlements dwelt in dormitories and barracks on the outskirts of the capital, struggling to survive rough living conditions.

In the collage captions, most striking are regular mentions of five- to ten-minutes late arrivals, no-shows, and other cases of labour misconduct punished severely in those years of Stalin’s rule.<sup>23</sup> The questionnaires

22 The questionnaires were filled by hand by the workers themselves, except where illiteracy prevented them.

23 One of the key documents that prompted the toughening of labour conditions of the period was the Resolution of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet from June 26, 1940: “On the



painstakingly enumerate reprimands, reproaches with a warning, and records of conviction—from corrective-labour work to prison terms. The circumstances behind violations leading to such strict disciplinary measures might have been diverse. But whether it was wilful negligence or attempts to overcome desperate situations remains by and large uninscribed in the reductive archival memory. In several cases, however, the fragmented and terse remarks, abbreviations and acronyms characteristic of the times coexist with first-person pleas and explanatory lines written in an unexpectedly casual, emotional tone. Some are small stories, vividly relaying the minutiae of the everyday.

In his subjective choice and provocative juxtapositions of condensed data, Sokol did not list all available facts of the workers' forgotten existence. Nor was he interested in collecting additional information. Consciously remaining within the inherently rigid boundaries of the archive, the artist set himself a goal to emphasize the mechanics of power intrinsic to the state-produced documents. The objectivist attitude enshrined in their form and style—describing, defining, taking account of seemingly banal or private data—rationalizes what is unquantifiable in a human being. Sokol spotlighted the personalities superseded by “papers,” by identity markers, traits, and functions relevant to authority, helping the unnamed workers to emerge as legitimate participants of historical drama. He enabled their voices, though weak and submissive, to be heard, to witness an experience of exclusion that is both specific and a transgression of historical particulars.<sup>24</sup>

Adding to this mass of documented, yet obscure, existences, another, more intimate kind of archival information—the factory employees' actual likenesses and samples of their handwriting—was assembled and artistically interpreted by Sokol. The artist relied on his favourite method, using carbon paper to trace the enlarged copies of photographic portraits and autographs from the files. Allowing his hand to follow the unique lines and patterns of facial topography, the idiosyncratic curves and dynamics of writing, Sokol psychosomatically appropriated and lived through the workers' identities. By internalizing the source images, he acted as a medium in an attempt to restore human presence with his bodily gestures.

transition to eight-hour working day, seven-day working week and on the prohibition of voluntary leave of workers and employees from factories and institutions,” accessed April 17, 2023, [https://www.libussr.ru/doc\\_ussr/ussr\\_4252.htm](https://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_4252.htm).

24 A similar logic of control is nowadays globally implemented in the collection of biometric and medical data, the accounting of travel and immigration, or even the filling-in of social media profiles.

The resulting artefacts were gathered in three large-format books made of technical paper produced at the “Oktyabr” factory and placed on plain desks. The first contained ninety-nine life-size face portraits on thin yellow paper, the second bore 250 oddly self-sufficient signatures, positioned one by one in the centre of heavyweight, white-gummed sheets, and the third included fifteen handwritten autobiographies on black carbon paper. As if meant to give each employee her or his due, all books, therefore, compiled different indexical information, that is the visual and graphological imprints of real people, as well as their narrative self-representations. Furnished with reading lamps, chairs, and fabric gloves for turning over the large pages, this part of the installation was an impromptu archival workspace.

According to Sokol’s own technique, the workers’ portraits in the “yellow book” were carbon traced from the frontal ID photos onto previously spray-painted, and still fresh, white spots. In effect, the facial features, and social indicators such as clothing and haircut were blurred. Only the eyes were, by contrast, purposefully nuanced—in every instance the artist conveyed an expressive, penetrating gaze, signalling the consciousness of the other. Enveloped in a distorting web of scar-like imprinted wrinkles and shades from the creasy carbons, these existentially sharpened likenesses intensified the urgency of the original photographs with their Barthesian intertwining of the *there-then* and the *here-now*.<sup>25</sup> They manifested themselves through black visual noise as if trying to reach us from the past, actively struggling to resist erasure and oblivion. Such fragile iconic presence provokes not so much fear or indignation, but a sense of profound compassion, making us relate to these human beings, to feel that we are fundamentally the same.

The remaining part of Sokol’s installation was comprised of three small video screens. The palimpsestic process was applied in the two animated videos consecutively running on the central screen in which one saw tracings of individual signatures and faces incrementally overlapping, and finally, losing legibility. While the surnames ultimately formed an abstract cloud of barely distinguishable strokes, the faces added up to an anthropomorphic silhouette. This cumulative portrait can be understood as a rough, condensed sign of the entire *Paper Memory* project.

The flanking videos, meanwhile, documented the long sessions of tracing the workers’ portraits and signatures with carbon paper. The camera, positioned above the sheet, captured the artist’s hands moving slowly and methodically, as though in an exercise of obedience. In the last moments

25 See Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 32–51, esp. 42–46.

of the signature-tracing video, the perspective changed to a view of the dimly lit room. Surrounded by the “Oktyabr” factory’s archive with shelf stands filled with folders, Sokol could be seen from behind, looking like a diligent glossator in a study, working at the desk. In these documenting videos, the artist authenticated his research by creating a self-referential image of method—a visual testimony to the performance of remembering.

Sokol witnesses on behalf of the oppressed: their voices, names, and images borrowed from the past, revealed, and reshuffled, together form a fragmented, fleeting, and ambivalent subjective reality that is open to empathy and interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Activating the human “memory of paper” by his own creative and kinetic gestures, the artist offered himself to channel that “*weak* messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim,” and to which, in turn, our own times might have a claim in the future.<sup>27</sup> His patient communion with people who once worked at the paper factory, through disclosure and mediation of the variety of preserved archival traces, recovered their presence for us. But also, one could argue, it called for a poetic and almost mystical redemptive anthropology that sees every transient human being as a symbolic link in the long re-enactment chain of suppression and struggle. Unfolding backwards into decades and centuries, this unsolemn history must not be forgotten.

### Double Perspective on Soviet Industrial Legacy

In their projects, both Otdelnov and Sokol transform a personally driven interest in the events of Soviet industrial history into an effort, in many ways autotherapeutic, to understand and work through traumas, resentments, and frustrations. Belonging to the past, they have lingering repercussions in the present. Nevertheless, the artists’ creative strategies point to the differences in their temperament, social background, training, and more generally, to their dissimilar views on the philosophy of history. Otdelnov emphasizes rupture and looks at the past from a separate position. He considers it important to encompass bygone events in an edifying total picture, assembling disparate pieces of memory that keep receding into the abyss of forgetting. Sokol, in contrast, comprehends history as a continuum of complex private experiences.

26 In this, Sokol’s position corresponds with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the witness as *auctor*. See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 148–50.

27 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 253–54.

He immerses himself and the viewer in a state of anachronic perception, striving first and foremost to stage a space for affective communication.

This key distinction also reveals itself in the way the artists treat the notion of testimony.<sup>28</sup> Otdelnov builds his *Promzona* as a multisensorial narrative environment wherein photographs and videos, objects, and scents are meant to be seen as true and accurate material evidence. They serve to support present-day arguments of various witnesses, as well as to verify the critical pictorial message of the paintings. This almost judicial rhetoric of authenticity both points to the factual and provides it with a clearly stated, however disputable, moral evaluation. Importantly, it aims to justify the aesthetic appeal of the painted ruins that appear suspended in metaphysical limbo at the “end of history” where one is stalking in awe.

Sokol, however, avoids exhibiting actual evidentiary material in an objectifying “museum mode,” drifting away from a consistent narrative and verifying intentions. Sensitive to the ethics of representation, he refrains from what he considers to be the exploitation of suffering.<sup>29</sup> He either references the authentic documents, both textual and visual, “retransmitting” them in different media, or uses the paper specimens as evocative ready-mades by means of a recontextualizing gesture. His goal is to appropriate the past through the act of reproducing, reworking, and reliving to gain the power to testify for someone who is long silent.<sup>30</sup> Questioning the very possibility of unbiased witnessing, Sokol eschews explicit verdicts in favour of an empathic mediation and asserts an alternative archive—in search of intuitive, poetic truth that equally partakes of memory and imagination. He does not provide detailed instructions for reading the elements of his installation, leaving the viewer to face a cryptic array of affective visual and verbal signs that may or may not be deciphered.

Otdelnov and Sokol access the Soviet industrial aftermath from two distinct perspectives: encountering grandiose ruins versus seeing an enduring social legacy. Moreover, by examining local subjects of various scale, they both attempt to convey the human drama of twentieth-century Russian

28 This issue was central for an online discussion held between Sokol and Otdelnov in 2020, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMGdMYLKZt4>.

29 For Sokol’s thoughts on the concept of testimony and its problematic nature in the field of art, see: Haim Sokol, “Ob’yekt kak svidetel’. Svidetel’ kak ob’yekt. Pis’mo drugu” [“The Object as Witness. The Witness as Object. A Letter to a Friend”], *Moscow Art Magazine* 102 (2017): 62–69.

30 For a nuanced exposition of contemporary standpoints regarding the problem of the witnessing agency of images, including the ethics of trauma representation, see: Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, “Introduction,” in *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, ed. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 1–20.

history—opting for a bold and spectacular admonitory presentation and an intimate, elusive statement, respectively. While Otdelnov meticulously produces an ambitious, multi-part requiem for an imperial dream, Sokol summons the spirits of the past to vindicate the proletarian energy of resistance. Concomitantly, the artists talk about the current industrial realities. Otdelnov's paintings and videos force one to consider the stalled production, economic and demographic decline, heavy ecological toll, and administrative neglect suffered by industrial Dzerzhinsk. This exposition of a regional case might be understood as a metaphor for post-Soviet Russia. His is a passionate civic appeal. Sokol's anthropological archive refers to the contemporary working class on a global scale, as well as alludes to modern-day societal hierarchies and conditions of labour that incorporate new technologies of control and surveillance. He does this through the affirmation of the redemptive force of remembrance.

Finally, both artists correlate the realities they encountered as part of *Promzona* and *Paper Memory* with their own experience as workers in the arts industry—not only in the social sense, but in the interplay between meaning and matter. Otdelnov's paintings, dependent on the chemical production of paints and varnishes, in a way fulfil the *telos* of the Dzerzhinsk industrial complex. Its remains have ultimately become a picture. Sokol, in turn, consciously invokes the witnessing power of paper, and as such, literally puts to use the various kinds of the factory's produce: cherishing its visual aesthetic, tactile properties, and semantic potential. Both projects show how the output of factories attains an artistic dimension. They remind us how the invisible, repressed existence of material production does not only captivate, but determines the production of culture in the “post-industrial world.”

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## List of Works

### Pavel Otdelnov. *Promzona* (Selection)

- Pits*. 2016. Lightboxes, digital prints. 170 × 120 cm each.
- Subjects of Memory*. 2016. Single-channel video. 30 mins.
- Wall of Fame*. 2015–19. Installation, oil on canvas. Sizes vary. Collection of Gazprombank. 12.02.1960. 2017. Acrylic on canvas. 180 × 260 cm.
- Passage*. 2018. Acrylic on canvas. 100 × 150 cm.
- Ruins. Passage*. 2017. Oil on canvas. 100 × 150 cm. Private collection.
- Ruins. Glory to Labour*. 2016. Oil on canvas. 180 × 260 cm. Private collection.
- Tracks*. 2018. Oil on canvas. 150 × 200 cm.
- Sand Pit*. 2018. Oil on canvas. 100 × 150 cm.
- Hazardous Zone*. 2018. Oil on canvas. 180 × 260 cm. Formerly in the collection of the Institute of Russian Realist Art.
- Deep Waste Repository*. 2016. Oil on canvas. 150 × 200 cm.
- Chemical Plant*. 2019. Single-channel video. 19 mins.
- From White Sea to Black Hole*. 2019. Single-channel video. 19 mins.
- Mutant*. 2017. Mixed media. 50 × 50 × 50 cm.

### Haim Sokol. *Paper Memory*

- Collection of Denis Khimilyayne
- Series of thirty collages with poetic captions and paper samples. 2017. Mixed media. 42.5 × 63 cm each.

*Black book.* 2017. Archival technical paper, cardboard binding, carbon paper. 15 pages. 90 × 60 cm.

*Yellow book.* 2017. Archival technical paper, cardboard binding, carbon paper, enamel spray. 100 pages. 80 × 60 cm.

*White book.* 2017. Archival technical paper, cardboard binding, carbon paper. 250 pages. 60 × 50 cm.

Four documentary videos. 2017. Length varies.

### **About the Authors**

**Anna Arutyunyan** is Senior Research Fellow and Curator at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. In 2006, she graduated from the Art History and Theory Department of the Lomonosov Moscow State University. She specializes in contemporary Russian art, as well as twentieth-century stage and costume design in Russia.

**Andrey Egorov** is Head of the Research Department and Curator at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. In 2006, he graduated from the Art History and Theory Department of the Lomonosov Moscow State University. He specializes in contemporary Russian art, as well as late medieval and early modern European art and architecture.

### Appendix 9.1<sup>31</sup>

Occasionally gas flues and traps had to be rapped with sledgehammers and cleaned with special scrapers. During this process the gases from the chlorination furnace would burst into the room, reacting with the water vapour in the air. As a result, a dense poisonous fog of hydrogen chloride, unreacted chlorine and phosgene, would form. In addition, regular (every 2 hours) discharge of the wasted materials from the chlorination furnace noticeably added to the mixture described above. Gas masks and sledgehammers are the main tools of the technical workers in this hell! However, people got used to this nightmare!..

Once during a shift, I went to see over the working rooms. There was a high gas concentration, usual for regular unloads of waste material blocks from the chlorination furnace. Wearing a gas mask, practically in zero visibility, I was slowly feeling my way through the condensation room. Suddenly, my hands touched a rounded object. Strange, nothing like this is allowed in this room! I took the object with both hands and tried to bring it closer to my eyes, or rather, to my gas mask. Then I heard an inarticulate moo.

To my amazement, the object itself rose, and I realized that it was the head of a man in a gas mask! Holding the head with both hands and backing to the exit, I led this man into the corridor. There he could take off the gas mask.

- Semikov! What are you doing here?
- I am having a bite, – he answered, removing his gas mask and continuing to chew. And then I noticed in his hand a piece of smoked sausage.
- How do you eat in a gas mask amidst such gas? Couldn't you find a better place?
- Everything is ok, boss: you pull off the mask and bite it. The only problem is that my jaw gets tired from chewing. I am wearing a new mask, the rubber is too tight! Anyway, I don't have time to go to the staff room, the process goes well and the drums\* should be removed soon, otherwise they will overflow!

(Sausage. "Caprolactam" plant. Shop 33. 1984)

\* Drums are special tanks in which products are stored.

31 See note 15. For the full version of the story in Russian: Otdelnov, *Bez protivogaza*, 15–16.



**Appendix 9.2**<sup>32</sup>

**Gluer of facility No. 2** [female] / Move to husband's place of work / Mbr. All-Union Leninist Young Communist League / 5 grades / russian / young woman;

**Assistant worker** [female] / due to a small / child / n.-party / – / worker / tatar / young woman / I don't have anyone at all / who I can leave / the child with;

**Shift master** [male] / As having no / accomod. / with assignment / at the disposal / according to submitted / notice / jew / from the workers / wounded in the leg;

**Freight handler** [male] / Asking You to give me / the pay-off / bec. I'm a teenager and / I cannot perform / heavy work;

**Binder** [female] / in connection with study / no / yes / mbr. All-Union Leninist Young Communist League / primary school / late arriv. 5 mins reprimand / late arriv. 5 mins reprimand / late arriv. 10 mins "reprimand" / reproof late arriv. 10 mins;

**Coal heaver** [female] / For indiscreet / behav wrt / the dep. director / re / move from post / and transfer to / fnsh facility / as assis / tant worker;

**Driver** [female] / As I was sentenced for theft / and taken into custody / no / yes / n.-party / 4 grades / served under corrective-labour work.

**Saturator** [female] / Due to family circumstances / yes / n.-party / 3 grades / russian / married – no children / husband in the Red Army / Herewith asking to be dismissed from the factory / on account of a small child / who is 2.5 months / Asking not to be refused / in my request.

**Assistant worker** [female] / n.-liable for military service / no / no / no / n.-party / 1 grd. / kolkhoz woman / russian / maiden;

**Calendar machine operator** [female] / For health reasons / and personal request / illiterate / social standing Ukrainian / Married husband died / Health condition / good;

32 These are rough translations. The gender of the workers, determined in the original Russian by gendered endings of words and/or by context, is here indicated in square brackets after the professional appellations in bold. While some abbreviations were preserved in translation, the Soviet acronyms like the RKKa (the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army), the VLKSM (the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League), or the ITR (corrective-labour works) were spelled out.

**Dyer** [female] Disabled II grp / member / semi-literate / russian / married / Ugreshsky stn. of Okrhuzhnaya rr. / Barack 37 rm 7”;

**Assistant wkr. to gluer** [female] / worked in a kolkhoz / peasant / not married / was in / occupation by germans / 2 years.

**Packager** [female] / Discharged from staff / in conjunction with sentencing / by court / and serv. punishment 4 yrs. / mbr. All-Union Leninist Young Communist League / 5 years / reassigned to transp. department / as freight handler / Reassign. as packager / reprim. for / 5 mins late arrival / absence 6 months no show / For no show 5 months / corrective labour / Put on trial for no show;

**Shift master facility No. 2** [female] / Expelled from the staff to / serve out / the sentence / 1 yr. corrective-labour camp / no / yes / n.-party / For bad administration / of the shift / announce / a reproof / For negligent attitude / Reproof / For late arriv. / 10 mins / Reproof / For late arriv. 10 m / Reprimand;

**Joiner** [male] / in connection with the sentence / by court / to 2 yrs. in / prison;

**Assistant wkr.** [female] / Expelled from the staff / as a deserter and / wntd. by militia forces / passed medical checkup and / under objective examination / approved to be / healthy.

**Gluer** [female] / Asking Your permission / to give me a pay-off / with a departure from Moscow / as I / have a house / and my own farmstead / in Kiev oblast / where / my mother lived / as the mother / died and / the farmstead is left / without attendance / and I need to / travel / otherwise all will be stolen bit by bit / and the house / might be occupied;

**Assistant worker** [male] / Asking for Your permission / to give me the pay-off / at my own request / as I have a 56 / year old / age / and receive / an old-age pension / Working has become / hard for me. In the present / time I am becoming / my daughter's dependent / and moving to join her / in Talin city;

**Guard** [female] / Watchwoman of the backyard / wilfully left / post / i.e., replaced myself / with my husband / and handed him / the rifle, / even more so knowing the manual of / guard duties / and crudely violated it / whereof I am bringing to Your / notice / to adopt measures.

## 10. Negotiating the Future of Post-industrial Sites through Artistic Practices

The 1975 Venice Biennale Project on the Stucky Mill

*Roberta Minnucci*

### Abstract

In 1975, the Venice Biennale invited thirty international artists to present proposals, in the form of works or projects, addressing the potential future uses of the abandoned Stucky mill on the island of Giudecca. The artistic responses, presented in the exhibition *A proposito del Mulino Stucky* in Venice, mostly failed to address the theme proposed by the Biennale, with the exception of the collective Environmedia. By examining the different levels of the artists' engagement with the historical, cultural, and social contexts of Giudecca, this chapter argues that the initiative of the Venice Biennale proved to be an early testing ground for employing art in the decision-making process within post-industrial regeneration, demonstrating how socially engaged practices were able to promote public debate and grassroots participation.

**Keywords:** Venice Biennale; Giudecca; Stucky; art regeneration; post-industrial

Stucky is a grand building  
At the bottom of the Giudecca  
With crumbling walls  
Which does not seem to resist  
Looking at it like that  
You wonder that it  
May have been the bread of a family.

It provided work to many, many people  
 Who wore themselves out  
 And nothing is left of it.  
 An anger that closes  
 Your throat when you remember  
 Hopes and fears  
 In those bad times.<sup>1</sup>

These lyrics, originally written in Venetian dialect by songwriter Gualtiero Bertelli in 1975, evoke the lives and collective memories tied to Mulino Stucky (fig. 10.1), a flour mill built between 1883 and 1897 on the island of Giudecca in the Venetian Lagoon.<sup>2</sup> The imposing new factory was an unusual addition to the urban landscape: a monumental brick building with pinnacles, pointed arches, and a 35-metre tower that rivalled the tallest campaniles of Venice.<sup>3</sup> The neo-Gothic design was initially opposed by the Commissione d'ornato (Town Hall Board of Ornaments) for its inconsistency with the stylistic features of the local urban landscape, but was ultimately approved, becoming the distinctive landmark of Giudecca.<sup>4</sup> The factory had been for half a century the driving force of the small island but, after its closing in 1955 and two decades of abandonment, by 1975, it appeared as a colossal industrial ruin.<sup>5</sup> In the same year that the song was composed, the Department of Visual Arts and Architecture of the Venice Biennale placed the derelict mill at the core of its programme *La Biennale: Un laboratorio internazionale* (*The Biennale: An International Laboratory*). This was done through an initiative which set out to gather artistic proposals, both through invitations and an

1 This research was generously supported by the Christopher Duggan Postgraduate Travel Bursary awarded by the Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI).

Stucky xe un palasson / In fondo a la Giudeca / Coi muri a picolon / Che par che no'l resista / Vardandolo cussì / Te fa na maravegia / Ch'el possa esser sta / El pan de'na famegia. / El g'ha dà da lavorar / A tanta e tanta gente / Che se g'ha consumà / E no xe restà niente. / 'Na rabia che te sera / La gola co ti ricordi / Speranze e paure / In 'sti bruti momenti. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

2 The industrial complex underwent several additions and changes until 1922. Raffaella Giuseppetti, *Un castello in laguna: Storia dei Molini Stucky* (Venice: Il Cardo, 1995), 23–65. The Giudecca Island, formed of ten smaller islands and facing St Mark's Square, is part of the municipality of Venice.

3 The Stucky mill complex was completed in 1897 from the design of German architect Ernst Wullekopf (1858–1927).

4 Jürgen Julier, *Il Mulino Stucky a Venezia* (Venice: Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, 1978), 21–23; Giuseppetti, *Un castello in laguna*, 35.

5 The permanent closure was preceded by a strike and the occupation of the factory. See Carlo Mantovani, *Stucky 1954: L'ultima difesa del castello* (Venice: Comune di Venezia, 2010).



Figure 10.1: Stucky Mill, Giudecca, Venice, 2007. Didier Descouens – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37622786>.

open call, on the future of the site. The resulting works and projects were later displayed in the exhibition *A proposito del Mulino Stucky* (*A Propos of Mulino Stucky*) held at Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere in the southern part of Venice.<sup>6</sup> The show attracted much criticism: Venetians accused the Biennale and the artists not only of having proposed works that were aesthetic speculations rather than viable projects, but also of perpetuating an elitist conception of an art detached from reality.<sup>7</sup> However, some artists, and most notably Environmedia—an Italian collective composed of young architects Pierpaolo Saporito, Mario Bellinis, and Francesco Binfarè—sought

6 The English translation *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* is based on the one which appears in the exhibition catalogue. In the poster produced for the occasion, the show is also referred to as *Proposte per il Mulino Stucky* (*Proposals for the Stucky Mill*). The programme *La Biennale: Un laboratorio internazionale* (May 1–December 20, 1975) included two exhibitions: *Le Macchine Celibi*, curated by Harald Szeeman, and *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*. Defined as *Mostre Speciali* (Special Exhibitions), they were not part of the Biennale's international programme, referred to as *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte* (International Exhibition of Art). The Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere were historical salt warehouses in the Dorsoduro district that had been saved from demolition thanks to a mobilization of artists and representatives of the cultural sector. See Carlo Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976. Eventi del 1975* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1976), 589–95, 848–55.

7 For a brief account of the reception and the press coverage of the exhibition see, Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976*, 167, 733–58.

to engage with the social and urban context through a collaborative project based on video interviews. Despite attracting the desired attention and sparking debate on the future of the abandoned mill, the Biennale's venture did not prevent its reconversion into a luxury hotel.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the project realized by Environmedia proves to be of crucial relevance, when considering the role of art in re-envisioning post-industrial sites, for having provided an effective model of engagement with the local community.

An examination of the 1975 Biennale's project on the former mill on Giudecca island brings to the fore core issues relating to the potential of artistic practices in negotiating the remains of the industrial past. Firstly, *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* represents an early attempt on the part of a public institution to employ art as a tool for reimagining the role of former industrial areas in the present.<sup>9</sup> In its role as a forerunner to later experiments, the project exposed at an early stage both pitfalls and benefits of artistic contributions to regeneration processes. Secondly, it offered a testing ground for understanding how different kinds of artistic practices were able to impact regeneration processes. I will argue that in the case of *A Propos of Mulino Stucky*, if, on the one hand, purely aesthetic responses lacked an authentic engagement with the issues at stake, participatory practices, on the other hand, effectively activated dialogic participation and fostered public engagement. Lastly, the Biennale initiative differed from later experiments in that the creative responses were intended as contributions to the ongoing public debate on the future of the mill, rather than a means to encourage direct engagement—physical and material—with the regeneration programme of the post-industrial site.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, art was employed as a tool that could promote imagination, reflection, debate, as well as participation within

8 In 2007, a five-star Hilton Hotel opened in the Stucky mill.

9 The interest of public institutions in the fate of abandoned post-industrial landscapes was a rare phenomenon in the 1970s and mainly related to the musealization of brownfield sites. See Dirk Schaal, "Museums and Industrial Heritage: History, Functions, Perspectives," in *Industrial Heritage Sites in Transformation: Clash of Discourses*, ed. Harald A. Mieg and Heike Oevermann (New York: Routledge, 2015), 146–53. Artistic responses based on community participation and related to regeneration efforts of post-industrial sites emerged only in recent years. Heike Oevermann, Jana Degenkolb, Anne Dießler, Sarah Karge, and Ulrike Peltz, "Participation in the Reuse of Industrial Heritage Sites: The Case of Oberschöneweide, Berlin," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 22, no. 1 (2016): 43–58; Louis Loures and Pat Crawford, "Democracy in Progress: Using Public Participation in Post-Industrial Landscape (Re)-development," *WSEAS Transactions on Environment and Development* 4, no. 9 (2008): 794–803, 795–97. The article considers as a case study the Emscher Park reclamation project in the German Ruhr Valley.

10 The exhibition's aim was to promote a public debate on urban spaces and the future of the Stucky mill. See Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976*, 165.

the decision-making process. Beyond its historical specificity, the attempted revitalization processes for the island of Giudecca offer an instructive lens for examining post-industrial regenerative artistic projects striving for social inclusion and historical reflection.

### *A Propos of Mulino Stucky: An Experimental Initiative of the Venice Biennale*

When the Biennale committee placed the Stucky at the centre of its 1975 artistic programme, the mill was abandoned: its high brick walls hid collapsing floors and ceilings, rubble and broken windows, as well as enormous empty spaces overtaken by wild vegetation.<sup>11</sup> In the nineteenth century, the construction of shipyards and factories improved livelihoods on the relatively poor island of Giudecca, but subsequent economic decline saw depopulation and an increasing impoverishment of its inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> For the small island, lacking public spaces and facilities, the future of the Stucky was a topic of crucial importance and urgency. Litoranea, the private company that owned the factory, had at first, in the mid-1960s, planned to demolish the Stucky in order to erect a housing complex.<sup>13</sup> Later, in 1968, the company opted to partially preserve the architecture during the course of its redevelopment into a hotel.<sup>14</sup> The industrial complex that was once the symbol of the economic power of the Venetian lagoon, was now in private hands, and thus, without legislative protection.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, its very survival was in jeopardy.

11 After its closure, the building was emptied and some of the machinery sent to Brazil. Giuseppetti, *Un castello in laguna*, 65.

12 For Giudecca's industrial development, refer to Anna Di Giovanni, *Giudecca Ottocento. Le trasformazioni di un'isola nella prima età industriale* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2009).

13 "Segnalazioni. Venezia. Mulino Stucky," *Italia Nostra* 37 (1964): 42; "Mulino Stucky," *Italia Nostra* 38 (1964): 27–28, 27; "Rispondono le autorità competenti. Venezia," *Italia Nostra*, no. 39 (1964): 50; "Rispondono le autorità competenti. Venezia," *Italia Nostra*, no. 41 (1964): 57–58; "Segnalazioni. Venezia. Ancora sul Mulino Stucky," *Italia Nostra* 42 (1965): 34–35. The planned demolition of the Stucky mill, which had been approved by the competent institutions, attracted nationwide attention and outrage. See "Lettera aperta di un gruppo di artisti veneziani al Capo dello Stato," *Italia Nostra* 48 (1966): 56.

14 "Si fa un grande albergo al posto dello Stucky?," *Italia Nostra* 60 (1968): 97.

15 As Joel Robinson explains, the 1964 Venice Charter on the preservation and restoration of historic monuments did not apply at the time to modern industrial structures. Joel Robinson, *The City on Display: Architecture Festivals and the Urban Commons* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 58.

For the Biennale, the Stucky mill represented the perfect testing ground for the new course of action that the institution had established in 1974 under the banner of a more authentic commitment to the social context. The new Biennale was presented as a permanent laboratory—experimental, project-based, interdisciplinary—seeking to incorporate decentred spaces in Venice and the Veneto region.<sup>16</sup> *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* was promoted by the Biennale's director Carlo Ripa di Meana and organized by Vittorio Gregotti, the architect in charge of the Visual Arts and Architecture sector.<sup>17</sup> Presented as a call for creative ideas that could envisage a new role for the derelict industrial building, the initiative, despite the focus on a local issue, sought to promote a wider public debate on the function of urban spaces.<sup>18</sup>

Although it was presented as an open call, the Venice Biennale, in the person of Vittorio Gregotti, sent letters of invitation to a large number of artists.<sup>19</sup> The final list of participants included thirty artists—mainly from Europe and the US—who had been invited by Gregotti to produce projects and works on the Stucky mill.<sup>20</sup> Their works and projects would later be exhibited, from September 15 to November 4, 1975, in the main section of the exhibition at Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere, together with those by artists and architects selected through the open call.<sup>21</sup> The documentation and video interviews produced by the Environmedia collective were also

16 Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1975. Eventi del 1974* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1975), 71–75. The reform, triggered by the protests that marked the 1968 edition of the Biennale, foresaw an internal restructuring of the organization and objectives of the Venetian public institution. See also Stefania Portinari, *Anni Settanta. La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2018).

17 *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* also paved the way for the establishment of the International Exhibition on Architecture of the Venice Biennale, whose first edition was held in 1980. See Aaron Levy, and William Menking, *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture* (London: AA Publications, 2010), 14–33.

18 Vittorio Gregotti, in Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1975), 14.

19 As it emerged from archival research held at the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), not all the artists invited chose to participate. Among the invitees who did not take part in the exhibition were artists Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren, Walter de Maria, Hans Haacke, Sol Le Witt, Claes Oldenburg, Denis Oppenheim, Edward Ruscha, and architect Arthur Erickson.

20 The final list of participant artists included: Christian Boltanski, Annette Messager, Mark Brusse, David Cashman, Mario Ceroli, Gianfranco Fini, Gianni Colombo, Guy de Rougemont, Mark di Suvero, Erik Dietman, Erro (Gudmundur Gudmundsson), Luciano Fabro, Öyvind Fahlström, Pancho Guedes, John Hejduk, Jannis Kounellis, Piotr Kowalski, Bernhard Luginbühl, Mario Merz, Nam June Paik, Giulio Paolini, Gustav Peichl, SITE (James Wines, Alison Sky, Emilio Sousa, Michelle Stone), Daniel Spoerri, and Jean Tinguely.

21 A minor section of the exhibition was devoted to unsolicited submissions. Little documentation is available on this second section, which is partially illustrated in the catalogue. For a complete list of participants to this second section, see Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976*, 168.



included in the display. The artists invited directly by the Biennale were offered the opportunity to spend some days in Venice for the purpose of gaining a more profound understanding of the historical and social context of Giudecca.<sup>22</sup> Environmedia worked on Giudecca for about two weeks between May and June 1975. The press release and the letter of invitation sent to the artists stated:

The competition is not intended solely to deal with the problem of reconstructing, and hypothetically re-utilising a particular building, by means of actual plans, but is intended also to spark off a spontaneous occasion of collective creativity, from which it will be possible to formulate general considerations on the image and the function of the city, on its history, on its present, seen from widely different viewpoints, and to give the opportunity to a debate involving public and community.<sup>23</sup>

The aim of the Biennale's call was to raise public awareness on the fate of the Stucky mill, in an effort to influence the decision-making process regarding the preservation and repurposing of the former factory by harnessing its international relevance. In this process, art was regarded as a tool for bringing attention to the disused industrial building by activating processes of regeneration and renewal.

### **Not a Memory Work**

Recent scholarship has examined artistic practices that reanimate and interrogate post-industrial landscapes by reconnecting them with individual and collective histories. Artist and scholar Gwen Heeney has drawn attention to the “creative potential of material memory and its relationship to the post-industrial landscape as a site for creative practice.”<sup>24</sup> In the examples collected in Heeney's anthology, art in a wide range of media—video, sound,

22 The number of days varied from one artist to another, spanning six to ten. However, not all the artists created works while in Venice; some shipped them in.

23 “La Biennale di Venezia and the Mulino Stucky,” Press release. Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, Venice, 1975. The same text was included in the invitation letter sent to the artists. See, for instance, the letter sent by Carlo Ripa di Meana to John Hejduk on May 14, 1975, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Venice, 1975.

24 Gwen Heeney, “Introduction,” in *The Post-industrial Landscape as Site for Creative Practice: Material Memory*, ed. Gwen Heeney (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2017), xiii.

photography, and sculpture—is employed as a powerful tool to reanimate and interrogate the post-industrial landscape. The crucial role of memory in reviving disused industrial sites is underlined also by scholar Hilary Orange, who argues:

Memory in relation to industrial space can be framed as a cognitive process which is informed by interaction with other individuals, authorised and popular forms of social memory, and the *thingness* of memory: the memory props, materials and environments of industrial spaces can act as change agent within that dynamic process.<sup>25</sup>

These investigations share a common interest in the creative potential embedded in the industrial ruin, a potential unleashed through artistic practices that materially engage with the site. Through a physical encounter with people and places, artists reconnect the present to the individual and collective histories tied to the industrial site as well as to a recent past and ongoing present that are given new meaning and relevance by this interaction.

Contrary to this approach based on presence, materiality, and memory, the project promoted by the Biennale did not entail a direct, physical involvement with the abandoned factory. While the video project conducted by Environmedia represented the only example of an engagement with the social context, all artistic contributions were encouraged to confront the present in order to address the future, rather than the past, of the abandoned industrial site. In this respect, the Biennale's call also presented a particular case in that it did not engage with the memory of the post-industrial site as have many subsequent regeneration plans using art and visual culture.

For *A Propos of Mulino Stucky*, the Biennale had nonetheless initially planned to give the artists the opportunity to work on site.<sup>26</sup> This course of action, however, soon proved impossible, since Litoranea denied access to the property when it found out about the initiative.<sup>27</sup> It hired armed watchmen and guard dogs to prevent trespassing. In addition, the company refused to

<sup>25</sup> Hilary Orange, "Introduction," in *Reanimating Industrial Spaces: Conducting Memory Work in Post-Industrial Societies*, ed. Hilary Orange (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015), 16–17.

<sup>26</sup> Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> The company Litoranea, affiliated to the Istituto Romano di Beni Stabili, came to the notice of the Biennale initiative through the pages of the architecture periodical *Domus*. See Letter from the President of Litoranea to the Biennale, July 23, 1975, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Venice. The call for contributions was published in *Domus*, no. 548 (July 1975).

provide plans of the industrial complex to facilitate on-site development of the artistic projects. If Litoranea interpreted the Biennale event as an accusation of having left the site in a state of neglect, this was indeed the case as no intervention had been made on the site for ten years. However, Litoranea rejected this claim.<sup>28</sup> The prohibition of artists' material and physical engagement with the industrial site was one of the main reasons behind the proposed works' remaining aesthetic speculations. The participants were unable to take the history of the mill into account, and nor were they able to engage with the material and social memories embedded in the building. While the artist Luciano Fabro and his collaborators, together with the members of the collective Environmedia, climbed over the gates, their experience of the place was a quick, illegal visit that did not entail a continuous and profound engagement with the location required by site-specific works.<sup>29</sup>

### Artistic Responses: From Aesthetic Practices to Social Engagement

The Biennale provided the artists with documentation including photographs, as well as historical and architectural details of the mill. Their responses varied greatly and showed different levels of engagement with the Stucky and Giudecca. Aesthetic and performative practices often presented a self-referential approach that lacked an authentic interest in the fate of the post-industrial site. Practices that encouraged dialogue and participation through social processes seemed, on the contrary, to offer more viable solutions which also accounted for the urban fabric and community relations on the small island. The works and projects realized for *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* that I examine below are presented according to their engagement with the social context. I begin with the responses that omitted the theme of the Biennale's call by generating purely aesthetic works and continue toward those that showed a higher

28 See letter sent to the Venice Biennale from the president of Litoranea, who claimed that the Biennale call was based on the false assumption that the Stucky complex had been left in a state of abandonment. Letter from the President of Litoranea to the Venice Biennale, July 23, 1975, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Venice.

29 Fabro and his collaborators' trespass is documented in the photograph published in the exhibition catalogue Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 60. Environmedia's visit to the industrial ruins of the Stucky is recorded in their video *Venezia—Mulino Stucky. Proposte per il mulino* (31'19"), Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Venice.

awareness of the urban and social environment. In surveying the different responses, I demonstrate that the Biennale proved to be an early experimental laboratory for regeneration processes that capitalized on the creative and transformative potential of art. Accordingly, *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* revealed opportunities and obstacles associated with the use of art in regeneration projects of brownfield sites.

Among the artists invited, many elected to ignore the aim of the call altogether: Mark di Suvero, Mario Merz, Pancho Guedes, Gianni Colombo, Bernhard Luginbühl, Mark Brusse, Nam June Paik, Mario Ceroli, and Gianfranco Fini were among those who created works entirely unconnected to the call.<sup>30</sup> Others worked with aesthetic practices that, despite referring to the visual landscape of the Venetian lagoon and the eccentric neo-Gothic architecture of the Stucky, did not address the future of the former industrial site. Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager presented a number of drawings and photographs taken in Venice, replicating and reinterpreting the stereotypical vision of the city from the tourist perspective.<sup>31</sup> Erró (Gudmundur Gudmundsson) imagined that the Chinese Cultural Revolution would peacefully take over the lagoon. He playfully juxtaposed depictions of Chinese soldiers with famous views of Venice—including the Stucky mill—and Old Master paintings, while proposing the reconversion of the former industrial complex into a Chinese restaurant for students and Giudecca locals.<sup>32</sup> These two examples provided visual reinterpretations of the lagoon without addressing the future of the Stucky or engaging with its urban and social context. In this respect, they demonstrated the perils of an international art system encouraging temporary and ephemeral site-specific art events, featuring responses by artists who have no sustained contact with the given place.<sup>33</sup>

Some artists engaged more effectively with the creative and imaginative potential of art, namely its visionary power and disruptive potential. Öyvind Fahlström presented projects and drawings envisioning the transformation of the Stucky into a place of entertainment, while Guy de Rougemont created photomontages in which the former industrial complex appeared as a tropical paradise.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the latter proposed an exchange of location between the Doge's Palace in St Mark's Square

30 For further details on the works, see Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*.

31 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 24–27.

32 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 56–59.

33 See Claire Doherty, "The New Situationists," in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, ed. Claire Doherty (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 8–13, 10.

34 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 66–68, 42–47.

and the Stucky mill on Giudecca, interrogating the relationship between the centre and the periphery of the islands in the Venetian lagoon based on economic inequalities. This proposal revealed the potential of art to interrogate and reimagine the future of post-industrial sites: by placing the Stucky mill at the centre of Venice's historic and touristic centre, de Rougemont reclaimed the crucial role of manufacturing sites and labour in building the city's economic power. Daniel Spoerri proposed the transformation of the Stucky into a pleasure house, *Le Moulin des Jouissances*, inviting other artists to present projects in different media and forms—texts, photographs, films, and videotapes—able to “define a place where several aspects of sexuality can be revealed.”<sup>35</sup> This approach was adopted as a polemical response to the Biennale's expectations for artists who lacked the tools to elaborate feasible projects. Spoerri explained it thus: “a concrete city-development project is not my field and I am not in the least familiar with the cultural, social, and economic requirements of Venice.”<sup>36</sup> These artistic responses uncovered the limits of aesthetic practices in relation to the regeneration of post-industrial areas. By not taking into account the subject matter of the Stucky mill and its future, these sculptural, project-oriented, and visual works did not effectively contribute to the discussion on the destiny of the post-industrial site, nor bring public attention. In addition, as explained by Spoerri, the invited artists did not possess the necessary knowledge of the local context to engage from a social, cultural, and historical perspective.

In some isolated cases, artistic practices pertaining to the domain of installation art resulted in a more authentic engagement with the issues at stake. Giulio Paolini conceived *Platea (Theatre Stalls)*, a site-specific project for an exhibition room at Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere (fig. 10.2). He placed thirty chairs—one for each participating artist—facing a projection screen with a sheet of paper bearing the following statement: “This project envisages that the present query about the use of the building won't find any final solution and that the area in question is fated to live through this inquiry as its perpetual destiny.”<sup>37</sup> His work constituted a reflection on the complex dynamics at the core of every project related to the reconversion of post-industrial sites. He addresses the limbo—often caused by legal or

35 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 104.

36 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 104. Projects exhibited by artists Jean Tinguely, Roland Topor, Niki de Saint Phalle, Bernhard Luginbühl, and Allen Jones, are among those presented in response to Daniel Spoerri's invitation.

37 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 90. The description of the medium is reported in Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976*, 166.

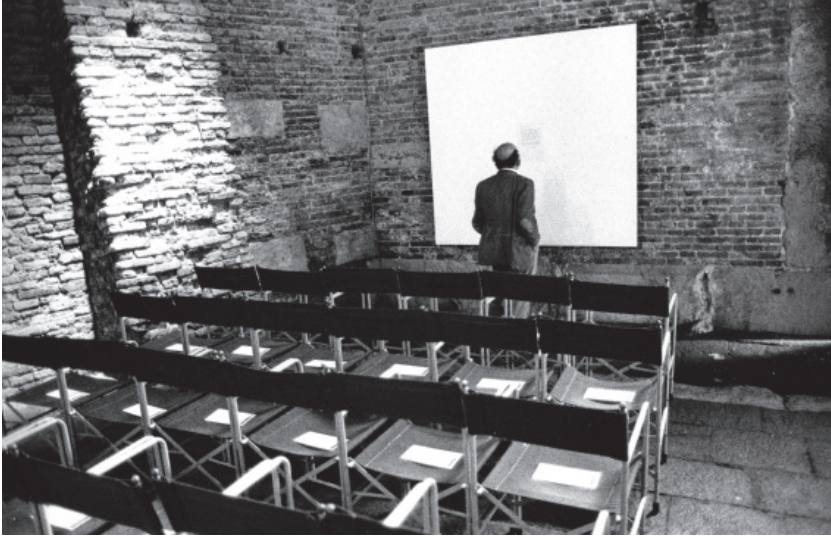


Figure 10.2: Giulio Paolini, *Platea* (*Theatre Stalls*). Exhibition *A Proposito del Mulino Stucky*, Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere, Venice, 1975. Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Venice.

administrative technicalities—in which these places are bound to remain, suspended between their first life as industrial site and a second that awaits a start. By associating each chair with one of the artists called upon by the Biennale to propose solutions and ideas for the future of the Stucky mill, Paolini also underlined that the challenge to overcome this impasse was a shared concern.

If *Platea* interrogated the current state of the Stucky and its uncertain destiny, the work presented by Jannis Kounellis explored the industrial past of the island itself. As the photographs published in the exhibition catalogue illustrate, the artist installed *Untitled*—a number of hanging weighing scales holding ground coffee—in the interior of a barge docked on the southern shore of Giudecca, facing the open sea.<sup>38</sup> Kounellis, interested in the trope of the sea journey, evoked the flourishing maritime trade that once animated Giudecca and had since disappeared with the closure of the mill. Despite not operating on the site of the Stucky directly, the artist managed to interact on a material level with the island and its industrial past by reanimating its surrounding waters, vessels, and traded goods. In this respect, he reawakened the memory traces of Giudecca by employing

38 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 74–75.

the “memory props” that Orange considers in the engagement with post-industrial landscape through its past.<sup>39</sup>

Some artistic proposals sought to respond with a practical approach to the historical and social context, proposing more realizable projects. David Cashman, for example, designed a project for an artist community based in the Stucky in collaboration with the inhabitants of Sacca Fisola, a council housing neighbourhood at the west end of Giudecca.<sup>40</sup> By exhibiting photographs of the working-class quarter along with children’s drawings, Cashman sought to unleash the regenerative power of art in neglected urban areas. Similarly concerned with the role of the building within the local context, artist Gustav Peichl proposed to convert the Stucky complex into communal spaces and resources for the inhabitants of Giudecca: green areas, a research centre, and a canteen.<sup>41</sup> A collaborative approach was adopted by Luciano Fabro, who arrived in Venice with a number of students and technicians. In their project *Tantalo (Tantalus)*, the Stucky was also supposed to be reclaimed by the local community as a space for cultural and leisure activities.<sup>42</sup> The projects by Cashman, Peichl, and Fabro for *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* demonstrated that little knowledge of the context and the inaccessibility of the site could be partially overcome by engaging more profoundly with the social and urban issues of Giudecca. Despite having grasped the importance of the social context and concerns related to the post-industrial site, however, the three artists did not activate processes of dialogue leading to change, as they did not interface with the inhabitants of the small island.<sup>43</sup> The project-based nature of their works, presented as possible solutions to give the post-industrial site an afterlife, were bound to remain creative ideas that, however, did not have an impact on the urban and social fabric of Giudecca.

39 Orange, “Introduction,” 15–16. As Orange underlines, and as it has been previously illustrated by Siân Jones and Lynette Russell, “memory props” are “objects, oral histories, real and invented landscapes, texts, images, stories, folklore, myths and knowledge of historical events.”

40 The construction of council estates in Sacca Fisola started in 1956. The area represents the westernmost point of Giudecca after the Stucky mill. For Cashman’s project, see Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 30–33.

41 Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 92–94. The project was also published as a booklet: Gustav Peichl, *Ristrutturazione Molino Stucky—La Giudecca. La Bomba verde* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1975).

42 The group was composed of Leonardo Treccosta, Anna Denza, Alberto Foi, Gigliola Magaraglia, Anna Lumachi, Rodolfo Bonfanti, Cesare Frare, and Jole De Sanna. Ripa di Meana et al., *A proposito del Mulino Stucky*, 60–65.

43 Detailed information about the reception of the works discussed is not extant. See footnote no. 7.

## Activating Social Participation through Video: Environmedia

On display in the main section of the exhibition was also the project *Intervento urbano di comunicazione ambientale e creatività collettiva* (*Urban Intervention of Environmental Communication and Collective Creativity*), realized by Environmedia. As mentioned above, the collective had been funded in 1974 and was composed of Italian architects Pierpaolo Saporito, Mario Bellini, and Francesco Binfarè.<sup>44</sup> Their project took place in Giudecca from May 22 to June 5, 1975, a few months before the opening of the exhibition at Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere on September 15. It represented the first collaboration between two different sections of the Venice Biennale, being a joint initiative of the Department of Visual Arts and Architecture and the newly established Commission of Information and Mass Communication.<sup>45</sup> To inaugurate the partnership, the Italian collective was invited to address the destiny of the Stucky mill through the use of new media and responded by activating processes of social participation that could give the local community's demands greater exposure.<sup>46</sup>

The work consisted of excerpts of video interviews with the residents of Giudecca addressing the future of the Stucky mill. In the early 1970s, video recording had started to be used as a political tool to document and bring to public attention social issues. In contradistinction to the film camera, the new technology of portapack video recorder offered manageability, lightness, and affordability, with the additional advantage of instantaneous dissemination. For the project on Giudecca, two teams of three people each operated the technical equipment and interviewed a large number of the island's inhabitants, from children to elders—including some former employees of the Stucky mill—encouraging them to share ideas, hopes, and opinions on the future use of the abandoned industrial complex.

The recordings were held in places of social gathering such as taverns, parish centres, schools, trade union halls, the street, as well as in residents' houses. The video interviews were displayed on screens in public places and

44 In Venice they were joined by a number of collaborators, among whom were Gabrielle Hall, Francesco Cavalli, Agnese Donati, Andrea Barzini, and Luigi Barzini. Carlo Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976*, 139.

45 The Commission of Information and Mass Communication was funded in 1974 and coordinated by Pier Domenico Bonomo.

46 Bonomo aimed to employ new media in the social context. See Pier Domenico Bonomo, "Per un uso sociale dei media," in *Comunicazione Comunitaria: L'esperienza di comunicazione audiovisiva nel quartiere della Giudecca*, ed. Carlo Ripa di Meana, Pier Domenico Bonomo, and Vittorio Gregotti (Venice: La Biennale, 1975), 2–3.



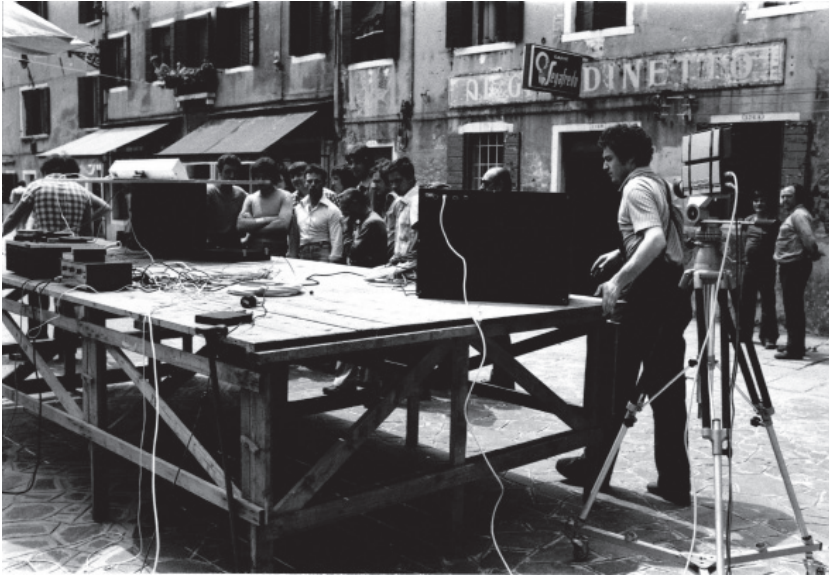


Figure 10.3: Environmedia, *Urban Intervention of Environmental Communication and Collective Creativity*, Giudecca, Venice, 1975. Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia (ASAC), Venice.

shared with a wide audience of Giudecca residents shortly after having been captured (fig. 10.3). Some monitors were placed in the square of Corte dei Cordami, and others in Campiello del Forno, Fondamenta di S. Eufemia, and Campo di Marte.<sup>47</sup> In turn, the reactions of the viewers to the screenings were filmed in one location and shown on monitors placed at other sites around Giudecca. This production and display practice activated a broad-reaching dissemination of information among residents of different neighbourhoods, social backgrounds, and ages.

As such, Environmedia's experiment represented a significant early example of a socially engaged artistic approach that would attract critical attention decades later.<sup>48</sup> It was, as scholar Grant H. Kester highlights in relation to contemporary practices, a project that fostered genuine dialogue within the community through performative and process-based strategies.

47 The first fixed station was in Corte dei Cordami and was later moved to other locations on the island. See Ripa di Meana et al., *Comunicazione comunitaria*, 9, 20.

48 See, for instance: Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012); Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

In such experiments, as he notes, “conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself. It is reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict.”<sup>49</sup> Rather than focusing on a physical object—such as in painting, photography, or sculpture—these practices engage with social participation by emphasizing duration and dialogue. The artwork itself is the process, “a locus of discursive exchange and negotiation.”<sup>50</sup>

For Environmedia’s *Urban Intervention of Environmental Communication and Collective Creativity*, inhabitants of Giudecca advanced widely differing requests and considerations on the redevelopment of the Stucky area. Often speaking in local dialect, adults searched for solutions to the main social and urban issues of the island, unanimously seeking to reclaim the post-industrial site for public use. A majority envisioned the mill transformed into social housing, while other voices called for its reconversion into a hospital, a cultural and sports centre, accommodation for students and factory workers, a green area. Children dreamt of an amusement park and were also invited to draw how they would picture the new Stucky.<sup>51</sup> According to Environmedia’s analysis in the catalogue devoted to their work, the children’s drawings represented the emergence of collective creativity that with age often becomes suppressed by institutionalized structures.<sup>52</sup> In the context of post-industrial landscapes, creativity has a particularly powerful role. As Cecile Sachs Olsen claims, the “negotiation within and interaction with urban space does not rely on its material and physical form alone, but also on a social and imaginative interchange that is open-ended and exploratory. This brings to the fore the role of collective imaginaries as part of urban processes and change.”<sup>53</sup>

The circular process of collective communication produced through the screening of video interviews, as well as of the recording and screening of the reactions of the public, allowed different social groups in Giudecca that were not in close contact to become aware of each other’s difficulties and hopes for their living conditions. An emblematic case is that of the inhabitants of Casermone, an abandoned monastery in Giudecca occupied by people

49 Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 8.

50 Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 12.

51 Excerpts of the interviews are included in the catalogue Ripa di Meana et al., *Comunicazione comunitaria*. Others appears in the video produced by Environmedia, *Venezia—Mulino Stucky. Proposte per il mulino (31’19”)*, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Venice.

52 Ripa di Meana et al., *Comunicazione comunitaria*, 33–34.

53 Cecile Sachs Olsen, *Socially Engaged Art and the Neoliberal City* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 6.

living in severe poverty. Their video interviews were shown on the monitors installed around the island, thus bringing their housing deprivation to the attention of other residents. This led to an in-person meeting between the inhabitants of Casermone and those of the rest of the island, an opportunity for discussion where common struggles were addressed.<sup>54</sup>

The use of video in Environmedia's practices reveals several analogies with its application in the social sciences. The video interviews displayed on monitors and the recording of the Giudecca audience reactions mirrored the use of video as "reflective": video was employed both as a "stimulus and a means of recording participants' reflections."<sup>55</sup> It also generated participation by fostering civic involvement that included marginalized groups—as in the case of Casermone—helping them to articulate their voices and share their concerns.<sup>56</sup> In Environmedia's *Urban Intervention of Environmental Communication and Collective Creativity*, the use of video was, however, channelled into artistic practice based on dialogical processes. The aim was to return the power of decision-making to the community through an open system of interaction, specifically, activities based on the assumption that only the local community could propose practical and effective solutions for the future use of the Stucky.

Environmedia operated as a mediator among different sectors of the population, encouraging a wider democratic participation in the urban development of Giudecca, thus creating a sounding board for people's demands. Social-practice artist Susanne Lacy proposes a critical examination of different practices in the domain of public art, identifying four different roles for the artist: the experienter, the reporter, the analyst, and the activist.<sup>57</sup> According to her four definitions, Environmedia's members can be considered as "reporters," since they gathered information and made it available, while consciously selecting the material collected.<sup>58</sup> They also challenged traditional concepts of art making by focusing on practices based on collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and public meaning, hence performing as "citizen-activists" in the aspiration to become catalysts for change.<sup>59</sup> The collective fostered civic consciousness by providing the residents of Giudecca with a platform from which to disseminate their

54 Ripa di Meana et al., *Comunicazione comunitaria*, 21–22.

55 Kaye Haw and Mark Hadfield, *Video in Social Science Research: Functions and Forms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 4.

56 Haw and Hadfield, *Video in Social Science Research*, 5.

57 Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 174–77.

58 Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*, 175.

59 Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*, 177.

voices, inviting them to make demands and express desires. Environmedia went on to reach a wider audience, composed of not only the island's residents, but also visitors to the exhibition *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* at Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere.<sup>60</sup> Despite the fact that Environmedia achieved the goal of the Biennale call—presenting, as envisaged by Ripa di Meana, different perspectives on the reconversion of the mill, while involving the local community and promoting collective creativity—their *Urban Intervention of Environmental Communication and Collective Creativity* did not have an impact on the decision-making process. Their projects were not taken into account by Litoranea, the private company owning the Stucky, nor by public institutions. In the face of property speculations and economic profit, the demands of the residents of Giudecca remained unheard.

### *A Propos of Mulino Stucky: Pitfalls and Strengths*

When *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* opened at Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere on September 15, 1975, the discrepancy between the aims of the initiative and the final results became only too clear. The works and projects displayed were received as part of the continuing failure of the Biennale to meet the aims of the 1974 four-year plan which had advocated a more inclusive, socially and politically engaged approach, none of which was achieved by the exhibition. This attracted sharp criticism from several quarters: the press, the visiting public, the population of Giudecca, and the trade union of the visual art workers.<sup>61</sup> Local newspapers defined the outcome of the Biennale initiative to be an intellectual exercise which, despite the interesting proposals, did not offer helpful or practical solutions.<sup>62</sup> The praise and positive press coverage devoted to Environmedia's project was not

60 The exhibition was attended by nearly twenty-five thousand visitors. Environmedia's video interviews were screened on monitors, while additional documentation was represented by six panels with photographs and texts, slides showing children's drawings, and a board where visitors could write their comments and suggestions for the future of the Stucky mill. Ripa di Meana et al., *Annuario 1976*, 141 and 167.

61 See "Documento del Sindacato Provinciale di Venezia della Federazione Nazionale Lavoratori delle Arti Visive—CGIL sulle mostre promosse dal settore Arti Visive della Biennale: 'Proposte per il Mulino Stucky' e 'Le macchine celibi,'" *Nordest*, October 16, 1975, 18. CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour) is one of the main trade-union federations in Italy. The statement was also posted on the walls throughout the city of Venice. See "Dura critica della CGIL a due mostre della Biennale," *Il Gazzettino*, October 26, 1975, no page numbers.

62 "Stucky: Un mulino che macina speranze," *Il Gazzettino*, October 21, 1975.

enough to restore confidence in the Visual Arts and Architecture sector of the Biennale.<sup>63</sup> In the general disinterest of government institutions—both national and local—and the regeneration project privately pursued by Litoranea, the Biennale's promises of renewal remained unfulfilled.

Despite falling short of its goals, however, *A Propos of Mulino Stucky* managed to draw public attention to the derelict building and spark debate about its future. This outcome was acknowledged by the Biennale committee, which considered the “lively controversy” provoked by the exhibition to have had “the merit, regardless of value judgments, of having brought this local and stagnant case to the fore of an international dispute over the fate of Venice and in particular of its most neglected urban areas.”<sup>64</sup> In 1988, the Ministero dei beni culturali ed ambientali (Ministry for Cultural Assets and Environments) imposed a protective measure on the building to definitively save the Stucky from being demolished.<sup>65</sup> Thanks to this legislative action, the former mill was declared a monument of national importance. Consequently, the external architectural design had to be entirely preserved, and only alterations to the interior were allowed.<sup>66</sup> In 1990, the Stucky was acquired by Società Acqua Pia which, in conjunction with the Venice City Council, undertook the conversion of the former mill over a twelve-year period into a five-star hotel, a congress centre, and residential properties.<sup>67</sup> The building has been restored and preserved in all its grandeur, still bearing the mark of the Stucky family on the external façades. Nevertheless, as a luxury hotel, the post-industrial site has been absorbed into Venice's tourist monoculture, severing conclusively any possible tie to the urban and social fabric of Giudecca.

63 For the press coverage of Environmedia's project, refer to Ripa di Meana et al., *Comunicazione comunitaria*, 10–11.

64 “[...] vivace polemica, e che ha perciò il merito, a prescindere dai giudizi di valore, di aver portato questo caso locale e stagnante alla ribalta di una vertenza internazionale sul destino di Venezia, e in particolare delle sue aree urbane più trascurate.” Marie-George Gervasoni, “Attività della Commissione per l'informazione e i mezzi di comunicazione di massa,” in Ripa di Meana, *Annuario 1976*, 139.

65 The constraint was imposed by the Ministerial decree of June 4, 1988, based on the cultural heritage protection law no. 1089 of June 1, 1939 in the category of industrial archaeology. Silvano Onda, “Lettura storica e architettonica del Molino Stucky,” in *Molino Stucky: Ricerche storiche e ipotesi di restauro*, ed. Francesco Amendolagine (Venice: Il Cardo, 1995), 3–25, 25.

66 See Francesco Amendolagine and Giuseppe Boccanegra, “Il Progetto di restauro,” in Amendolagine ed., *Molino Stucky*, 77–83.

67 Sheila Palomares Alarcón, “From Fantasy to Reality: Adaptive Reuse for Flour Mills in Venice,” in *Intelligence, Creativity and Fantasy*, ed. Mário S. Ming Kong, Maria do Rosário Monteiro, and Maria João Pereira Neto (London: CRC Press, 2019), 172–77, 175.

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### About the Author

**Roberta Minnucci** is an art historian and curator specializing in postwar Italian art. She is currently Postdoctoral Fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome. After having obtained a PhD from the University of Nottingham (UK), she has been the recipient of fellowships from the Getty Foundation, the British School at Rome and Magazzino Italian Art.



# SECTION FIVE

POST-INDUSTRIAL DESIGN



## 11. Pylon-Spotting in *The Architectural Review* 1950s–1980s

*Juliana Yat Shun Kei*

### Abstract

In British architecture, the notion of post-industrialism was articulated as early as the 1910s when the activities and technologies from the First Industrial Revolution became obsolete. This post-industrialism thinking was also integral to the development of modern architecture and design in Britain, including the Arts and Crafts movement. In this chapter, we look at how the discussions about post-industrialism were developed in the influential magazine *The Architectural Review* in the post-war era. This study points out that in British architecture, the notion of the post-industrial reflects a complex attitude towards progress and decline. In this effort, pylons—the supposed icon of modern progress—will be used as a linchpin for tracing the convoluted intellectual terrain in architectural post-industrialism.

**Keywords:** pylons; architectural magazine; postmodern architecture; hi-tech architecture

Encase your legs in nylons,  
Bestride your hills with pylons  
O age without a soul;  
Away with gentle willows  
And all the elmy billows  
That through your valleys roll...<sup>1</sup>

In his 1955 poem “Inexpensive Progress,” the pre-eminent British poet John Betjeman laments the destruction to English culture and landscape

<sup>1</sup> John Betjeman, “Inexpensive Progress,” in *High and Low* (London: Murray, 1966), 67.

brought by rapid industrialization.<sup>2</sup> He uses pylons and nylons as examples of modern industrial inventions that displace old villages, grassy hills, and other picturesque features of the British landscape. In a later part of the poem, Betjeman also criticizes changes that are now more commonly labelled as post-industrial and postmodern. He bemoans the losses of the provincial High Streets and writes, “but let the chain stores place here, their miles of black glass facia, and traffic thunder through.”<sup>3</sup> “Inexpensive Progress” offers a glimpse into the disorienting landscape found in post-war Britain: the manufacturing industries were expanding, and the changes brought by globalized trade and commerce were also becoming more visible. A developing nostalgia for the ways commerce and communication were organized in the past are also manifest in Betjeman’s poem and other literary works.<sup>4</sup>

Betjeman’s critique of British landscapes and townscapes is shared by the writers and editors of an influential architectural magazine, *The Architectural Review* (*AR*), for which he once worked as an editor.<sup>5</sup> The *AR* is a monthly architectural magazine founded in London in 1896. Under the editorship of Hubert de Cornin Hastings in the late 1920s, the journal became a leading proponent of architectural modernism in Britain. Throughout the twentieth century, the *AR* remained an influential voice in British architecture. Betjeman’s attention to road signs, hoardings, huts, power stations, and other physical changes in British towns and countries resonated with the “Townscape” campaign launched by the *AR* in 1949.

In the existing historiography of post-war British architecture, “Townscape” has been seen by scholars as an ambitious attempt to develop a British approach to modernism.<sup>6</sup> It is also regarded as an alternative expression to the architectural influence from continental Europe, such as the rationalist and mechanized aesthetics exemplified by French architect Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus in Germany.<sup>7</sup> More recently, architectural historians

2 Betjeman, “Inexpensive Progress,” 67.

3 Betjeman, “Inexpensive Progress,” 67.

4 Mark Tewdwr-Jones, “Oh, the Planners Did Their Best: The Planning Films of John Betjeman,” *Planning Perspectives* 20, no. 4 (October 2005): 389–411.

5 Peter Davey, “Townscape: The AR’s Campaign to Alter the Perception of Planners and Politicians,” *The Architectural Review* 1376 (September 21, 2011), accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/townscape-the-ars-campaign-to-alter-the-perceptions-of-planners-and-politicians>.

6 Alan Powers, “Townscape as a Model or Organised Complexity,” *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 5 (2012): 691–700.

7 Jonathan Glancey, “Townscape and the AR: Humane Urbanism in the 20th Century,” *The Architectural Review* 1396 (June 7, 2013), accessed April 16, 2023, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/townscape-and-the-ar-humane-urbanism-in-the-20th-century>.

including Alan Powers note that the *AR*'s campaign should be understood as a commentary on the organization of post-war society.<sup>8</sup> Betjeman's critique, in particular, echoed a series of articles entitled "Wirescape," in the "Townscape" campaign, published since 1951. For example, the *AR*'s writers and editors use the term "Wirescape" as shorthand for the visual disarray caused by poor planning and urban design. Pages and pages of photographs and sketches illustrating the overwhelming presence of wires—pylons, telephone poles, television fences and masts—are put forward as evidence of the population's "collective loss of visual sensitivity."<sup>9</sup> In the *AR*, pylons and other poles are seen as indicators of the transformations in urban and rural landscapes, signifying the threat of rapid industrial and societal changes.

Almost concurrently, the *AR* was developing its alternative articulation of post-industrialism. In January 1950, in a feature article entitled "The Functional Tradition," its contributors drew attention to old infrastructure and utilitarian structures such as piers, bridges, and electric poles. They deliberated over how to appreciate, preserve, and re-use these industrial legacies.<sup>10</sup> The re-appraisal of earlier industrial culture is reiterated two months later, when an etching of London's Crystal Palace, a glass and iron structure built in 1854, appeared on the March 1950 cover. The same issue featured a sixteen-page scholarly article on the first iron buildings, many of which were mills and factories.<sup>11</sup> The *AR* thus presented the techniques, products, and structures invented in the nineteenth-century industrial revolution as traditional phenomena from a bygone era. The *AR*'s message was convoluted: on the one hand, the contributors regarded industrial structures from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as obsolete. They championed the preservation of these industrial heritages. On the other hand, in both the *AR*'s articles and Betjeman's poem, the writers showed a preference for structures from the earlier industrial age over post-war infrastructures and buildings.

The *AR*'s complex and at times contradictory views about progress and obsolescence in their coverage of the pylons and wirescapes offer a glimpse

8 Powers, "Townscape as a Model or Organised Complexity," 693.

9 "Wirescape: Comments (with Appropriate Illustrations) on the Distinguishing Feature of the Twentieth Century Landscape," *The Architectural Review* 110 (December 1951): 376–82.

10 "The Functional Tradition," *The Architectural Review* 107 (January 1950): 2–66. The relationship between the "Functional Tradition" and industrial building will be clarified later by the publication of J. M. Richards, the *AR*'s long-term editor, entitled *The Functional Tradition in Early Industrial Buildings* (1958).

11 Turpin Bannister, "The First Iron-Framed Buildings," *The Architectural Review* 107 (April 1950): 231–46.

into how post-war architects, designers, and planners conceptualize post-industrialism. My current research also builds on earlier study by James Purdon in which the portrayals of pylons are used to understand British artists' attitudes towards modernity in the earlier part of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Using the images printed in these publications—an influential force in the production of buildings, cities, and culture—this chapter adds to current studies on the representation of de-industrialization and post-industrialization. In particular, this research is inspired by the articles on “Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialisation, Class, and Memory,” published in 2013.<sup>13</sup> Scholars including Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon consider the multifaceted implications of the documentation, analysis, and fictionalization of de-industrialized sites. They are critical of the omission and neglect shown to working-class communities found in “ruin porn” publications which tend to show aestheticized photography of vacated factories, warehouses, and former industrial towns.<sup>14</sup> Strangleman also identifies a “voyeurism,” akin to early-modern tourism in many documentations of de-industrialized landscapes that romanticized ruins and dilapidated sites.<sup>15</sup> However, he also argues that not all “ruin porn” has completely disregarded the social, economic, and cultural costs of industrial change, and these publications offer a starting point for more critical discussions. In this chapter, I grapple with the pictures from the other side, asking: how do stakeholders of the built environment such as architects and planners envision de-industrialization and post-industrialization? What did they say about the infrastructures which are not vacated, but are seen as out of place and out of time, such as pylons, pipes, telephone poles? Moreover, what can we add to the critique of voyeurism by examining the ways architects and architectural writers as middle-class professionals represent the changing industrial landscape? In this effort, I draw on Strangleman's emphases on the agency of the images. Photographs and drawings can be used to shed light on the entangled physical, cultural, and socio-economic conditions brought by industrial changes. Their works are also a reminder of the difficulties in distinguishing the representation, imagination, and reality of post-industrialization. Hence, my current chapter is not attempting to offer

12 James Purdon, “Landscapes of Power,” *Apollo* 177, no. 605 (January 2013): 42–49.

13 Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon, “Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 7–22.

14 Steven High, “Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 140–53.

15 High, “Beyond Aesthetics.”



a comprehensive survey of how post-industrialization was discussed in post-war British architecture. Instead, we will saunter around a landscape of post-industrialism that is partly realistic, partly exaggerated, and partly imagined by architects and architectural writers.

### Post-Industrialism, British Culture, and Heritage

It is worth highlighting the differences in the discussions of post-industrialism in British architecture from the well-known definition of the term by scholars including Daniel Bell in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> The earliest mention of post-industrialism in Britain can be traced back to the first decade of the twentieth century. In the 1910s, British artists, designers and writers including Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Arthur Penty, and C. R. Ashbee developed their theory on post-industrialism. They employed the term to promote alternative design and manufacturing methods to those of Western industrial capitalism.<sup>17</sup> These early discussions on post-industrialism were also closely tied to the Arts and Crafts Movement, led by figures including William Morris, who tried to reconcile industrial progress with the crafts tradition, socialism, and environmental awareness.<sup>18</sup> The *AR*'s editors and writers would have been aware of this early notion of post-industrialism since Nikolaus Pevsner, one of their long-term editors and a key figure behind the Townscape campaign, also conducted research into William Morris and C. R. Ashbee's works.<sup>19</sup> In his influential 1936 publication *The Pioneer of the Modern Movement*, Pevsner argues that Morris's effort to establish aesthetic and social values in everyday objects should be recognized as the intellectual underpinning of modern architecture and design.<sup>20</sup> Pevsner's writing set the scene for the *AR*'s investigation into the early industrial structures, regarding their obsolescence as an opportunity for developing other types of industrial organization and culture.

In short, in British architecture, post-industrialism had been employed to describe arts, architecture, and design that were not dominated by

16 Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (London: Penguin, 1976).

17 Margaret A. Rose, *The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21–39.

18 Sria Chatterjee, "Postindustrialism and the Long Arts and Crafts Movement: Between Britain, India, and the United States of America," *British Art Studies* 15 (February 27, 2020): 1–45.

19 Nikolaus Pevsner, "William Morris, C.R. Ashbee and the Twentieth Century," *Manchester Review* 7 (Summer 1956): 437–58. First published in *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift* 14 (1936): 556–62.

20 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).

the logic of capitalistic mass production.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it was not a late twentieth-century phenomenon. Instead, the term has been employed in the discussion on how alternative earlier forms of industrialism were negated. However, this practice of claiming activities and technologies from an earlier period of the industrial revolution as antiquated has notable drawbacks. Historian Martin Weiner, for example, argues that this approach has led to a neglect of working-class culture and a complacency towards the economic and social costs of industrial change.<sup>22</sup> Historian Robert Hewison similarly points out that this attitude underpins the heritage industry which capitalizes on nostalgia towards a fabricated industrial past. Hewison observes British cities and towns turn mills and factories from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into touristic sites that romanticize manual labour, without critical engagement with industrial history. The heritage industry, Hewison stresses, hinders the development of other forms of culture that can better respond to the societal conditions of the time.<sup>23</sup> A similar discussion can also be found in David Lowenthal's *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, in which he laments the tendency of concealing technological and industrial changes in late twentieth-century architecture. Lowenthal argues that the architects and designers dedicate their creativity and time to producing anachronistic and nostalgic buildings, instead of devising architectural solutions that can better respond to the technologic and socio-economic reality of the late twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> These critiques of British culture also share some similarities with the analysis on ruin porn: the romanization of a past that might not have existed, a lack of genuine engagement with working-class life, and a peculiar fascination with decline.

Despite these early articulations of post-industrial British architecture and design, the term was not evoked in the pages of the *AR* again until 1980. This later-day coverage of post-industrialism shows up in unexpected places. One of the most comprehensive discussions on post-industrialism is found in a 1980 feature on interior design by the magazine's long-term contributor Lance Wright. In this article, Wright suggests that the term post-industrialism lends weight to architectural and design theory's resistance to the industrial aesthetics which underpin modernist practices.<sup>25</sup> For Wright,

21 Rose, *The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial*, 21.

22 Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

23 Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

24 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

25 Lance Wright, "Post-Industrialism," *The Architectural Review* 168 (October 1980): 200–202.

post-industrialism is a valuable concept because it “lifts architecture from the bondage of necessity and makes it once more what it always used to be: a matter of public entertainment.”<sup>26</sup> He argues that post-industrialism may, in turn, revive the historical role of architecture for fostering civic pride and identity. In his article, Wright emphasizes that the term signifies an ability to reconcile with the past. In the issue, the post-industrial interiors are often spaces combining streamlined modernist design with a few pieces of flamboyant furniture that provide a sense of humour, intrigue, and affection. This characteristic should also be understood as a critique of modernist and postmodern architecture, the dominant architectural style in the 1980s. Postmodern architecture is often associated with a call for a more democratic, multivalent, and even popular approach to architectural design, as seen in the works of Charles Jencks, Robert Venturi, and Dennis Scott Brown. As a reaction to the modernist rejection of historical influences, postmodern architects also re-incorporate classical language in their design. However, by 1980, postmodern architecture was also criticized as confusing and lacking a clear intellectual underpinning.<sup>27</sup> Many of these debates on postmodern architecture unfolded in the first Venice Biennale of Architecture, held in 1980. The event was curated by Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi, whose work will be examined in a later part of this chapter. Thus, the evocation of post-industrialism in the *AR*, can be understood as an attempt to offer an alternative to the dominant expressions of contemporary architecture and design. Wright argues that post-industrialism, as a term, is at once more specific, and more accommodating than postmodern. Unlike postmodernism, he adds, post-industrialism does not stand in opposition to all things related to modernist architecture.<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding the narrow conception of postmodernism assumed by Wright, his article shows that post-industrialism is again employed as an alternative, as something other than the dominating architectural expression of the time. This approach is similar to how the term was first coined in the 1910s, and in the Townscape campaign when it was employed to criticize the seemingly overwhelming influence of modernist architecture and planning. In short, until the 1980s, the *AR* writers tended to present post-industrialism as a potential remedy to the problems they found in British architecture of the time. However, it is also worth noting that Wright’s discussion of

26 Wright, “Post-Industrialism,” 200–202.

27 Paolo Portoghesi, *The Presence of the Past*, Catalogue for the First International Biennale for Architecture, 1980.

28 Portoghesi, *The Presence of the Past*.

post-industrialism focuses on the stylistic debate within architecture. There is little consideration of how the interior space and objects may be manufactured or used. Moreover, the *AR* writers no longer comment on the conditions and consequences of industrial change, as seen earlier in the Townscape campaign. In the remaining part of this chapter, by following the pylons, I will trace how these divergences emerged.

## Holy Cows

Revisiting the *AR*'s coverage of the pylons in the post-war period, one can still find the call for an alternative approach to industrial progress. For example, in 1955, the *AR* writers state that pylons, arterial roads, and lamp standards are not "bad in themselves." However, there are too many pylons and wires, and these structures are thrown into towns and the countryside by engineers without evaluation of their visual impacts.<sup>29</sup> The *AR* writers stress that they appreciate the importance of industrial and technological progress, but they are also highly critical of "uncontrolled progress."<sup>30</sup> In their words, "to deny progress is as lunatic as the situation to which uncontrolled progress has brought us."<sup>31</sup> In the pages of the *AR*, the pylons are regarded as blunt instruments that enable industrialization and modernization, and thus, should be re-designed and re-organized. The pictures in the *AR* also reflect their idea that pylons, poles, and wires should not overwhelm the presence of significant buildings and natural terrains. The *AR*'s nuanced attitude towards industrial progress is echoed by contributors to the magazine. For example, in October 1955, influential landscape planners Sylvia Crowe and Kenneth Browne published an article entitled "Encroachment," in which they write,

this invasion is symbolized by the ubiquitous electricity pylons, which, though not displeasing in themselves, march relentlessly from the city power station, clean across the open beauty of the Downs, destroying for ever and from every point of view their principal contribution: wildness, and an untrammelled clarity of form.<sup>32</sup>

29 "Outrage: Fully Illustrated Issue Attacking 'Subtopia' and the Progressive Obliteration of the British Landscape by Unimaginative, Vandalistic Development," *The Architectural Review* 117 (June 1955): 364–460.

30 "Outrage," 364–460.

31 "Outrage," 364–460.

32 Sylvia Crowe and Kenneth Browne, "Encroachment: A Study of the Need for Research into the Capabilities of Areas of Landscape to Provide Rules of Thumb for the Siting of New Buildings,"

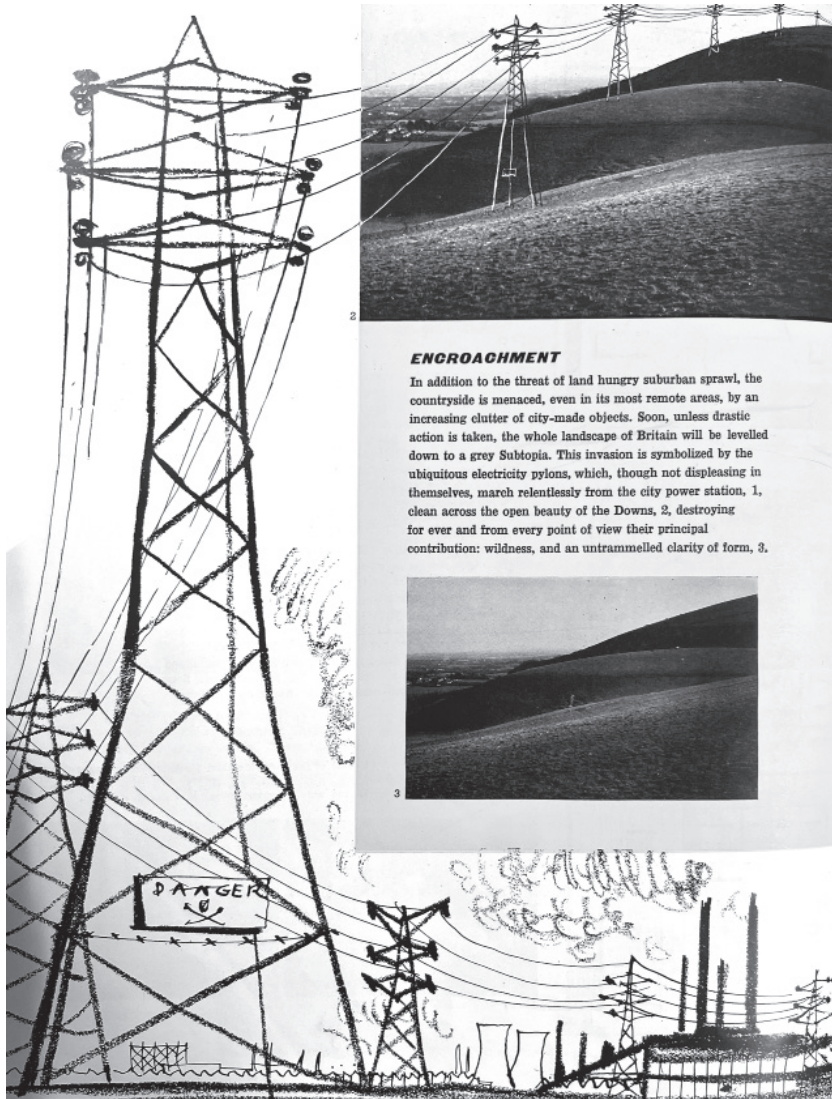


Figure 11.1: “Encroachment,” *The Architectural Review*, October 1955.

Crowe and Browne deem pylons as “city-made objects” that cause menace in the English countryside (fig. 11.1).<sup>33</sup>

In these articles, the *AR* envisions industrial and technological progress can inspire new methods to preserve and improve the natural and historic

*The Architectural Review* 118 (October 1955): 248–54, 250.

<sup>33</sup> Crowe and Browne, “Encroachment,” 248–54.

landscape—a sentiment that is akin to the “post-industrial” vision first articulated by Ashbee and Morris. The *AR* proposes the pylons and cables should be put underground, or at least strategically concealed by natural terrain, to maintain the visual integrity of English towns and countryside. For example, in the article “Bingham’s Melcombe,” the *AR* writers propose covering up the electricity cables with vegetation and hills to conserve the historic scenery found in the sixteenth-century manor house.<sup>34</sup> They conduct visual studies analysing how the pylons may be seen from scenic places near the manor. To reconcile the tensions between modernization and preservation, the *AR* turned its attention to an alternative industry that could justify the concealments: the tourist industry. In a 1959 article on a scenic town in Devon and a 1967 article on the new high voltage electricity network, the authors urge preserving the English landscape even if it is “just for the tourist money.”<sup>35</sup> The discussion on tourism is also front and centre in the article on Bingham’s Melcombe, where various design strategies are proposed to ensure the tourists’ gaze is not interrupted. These discussions of the pylons display a kind of “creative anachronism” that has been criticized by historians including Lowenthal.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, in the pages of the *AR*, there is also optimism that technological progress can eventually improve the preservation of the landscape.

In the 1970s, the *AR*’s critique of the pylon invasion of the landscape is renewed due to shifts in architectural culture. At the time, a new style called Hi-Tech architecture, spearheaded by British architects including Norman Foster and Richard Rogers, came to prominence. On the one hand, the Hi-Tech movement responded to the burgeoning environmental movement. It sought to create buildings with better performance in lighting, ventilation, and energy consumption. However, Hi-Tech architecture also took seemingly ubiquitous industrial materials such as corrugated metal panels, pipes, and garage doors as their visual expressions. In 1974, the *AR* showcased one of the early Hi-Tech buildings in Britain, alongside a few eye-catching pylons. The building, designed by Norman Foster, and built at Thamesmead near London, is called the Office and Warehouse for Modern Art Glass (fig. 11.2).<sup>37</sup> The full-spread picture shows the windowless rectangular building, clad in bright blue corrugated metal, standing in the middle of a farm where cows

34 Gordon Cullen, “Bingham’s Melcombe and the Struggle with Rule-of-Thumb Planning to Preserve Its Landscape,” *The Architectural Review* 126 (August 1959): 100–104.

35 “Wirescape: The March of 400KV,” *The Architectural Review* 141 (February 1967): 123–26.

36 Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, 363–68.

37 John Winter, “Glass on the Marsh: Offices and Warehouse, Thamesmead,” *The Architectural Review* 156 (July 1974): 50–57.



Figure 11.2: "Glass on the Marsh: Offices and Warehouse, Thamesmead," *The Architectural Review*, July 1974.

are grazing. The pylons, meanwhile, stand at the back of the picture hinting at the scale of this confusing landscape. The image is striking: it resembles a pastoral landscape painting with the open sky, the overgrown yellow grass, and the absence of human figures. The conditions found around the Modern Art Glass building are disorienting. It is hard to determine whether it should be called a pre-industrial, industrialized, or post-industrial landscape.

A closer examination of the building reveals more contradictions. Although the Modern Art Glass building looks like a factory, it is in fact an office building with showroom and storage spaces. The streamlined Hi-Tech aesthetic is enabled by the absence of manufacturing activities. Because there is no strict requirement for ventilation, light, waste, and other industrial infrastructures, the designers have more freedom in determining the form and material of the building. One may even argue that the use of industrial materials in Hi-Tech architecture is an expression of post-industrialization. These mass-produced building elements are chosen not because of cost, efficiency, or functional concerns. They are used as visual elements to create a supposedly accessible architectural language due to their ubiquity.<sup>38</sup> In addition, although Hi-Tech architecture carries

<sup>38</sup> Charles Jencks, *Late Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (London: Academic Editions, 1980), 6–9.

forward the modernist adherence to industrial aesthetics, the architects have departed from the modernist impulse to elicit wider changes.<sup>39</sup> Unlike their modernist predecessors, the architects of the Modern Art Glass building do not seek to alter the surroundings of the building, other than to use eye-catching colour in contrast to the surrounding industrial estates which are predominantly grey.<sup>40</sup> The buildings are no longer perceived or presented as drivers for social or industrial progress. Instead, the Modern Art Glass building remains a weird object in a fragmented landscape.

In comparison to previous articles on the pylons, the Modern Art Glass building displays a less critical attitude towards the surrounding landscape. The *AR* writers also did not call for alternative approaches to progress and modernization, as seen in previous articles that feature similarly disjunct landscape. In another example of this lack of integration, a sense of disillusionment is found in a subsequent article on the Skylon, a 91-metre vertical feature of the Festival of Britain, which looks like a pylon. The Festival of Britain was a nation-wide event held in 1951 to revive the national spirit after the trauma of the Second World War. The Welfare State vision was put forward at the Festival of Britain together with large-scale post-war reconstruction and urban regeneration projects. By the 1970s, however, modernist architecture and the Welfare State political project were both being challenged by architects and politicians alike. This departure from the post-war commitment to modernist reconstruction and rebuilding is also manifested in the *AR*'s assessment of the festival and the Skylon: "through the worst excess of brutalists on the one hand and developers on the other it all seems rather touchingly hopeful and by no means despicable."<sup>41</sup> In these pages, the architects and architectural writers turn away from the modernist commitment to drive societal progress through improving the built environment, in favour of inward-looking dialogues such as how to reconcile the arts and sciences in building design. This shift is also manifest in their treatment of the pylons. In the Modern Art Glass article and the subsequent reportage, pylons are no longer seen as eyesores or signifiers of an earlier approach to industrialization and modernization. Instead, they are accepted as part of the everyday landscape that architecture cannot alter.

39 Inderbir Riar Singh, "Utopia an Interview with Reinhold Martin," *Journal of Architectural Education* 67, no. 1 (2013): 77–84, 78.

40 David Jenkins and Norman Forster ed. *Norman Foster Works 1* (New York: Prestel, 2003), 194–199.

41 Mark Girouard, "Nostalgia: It's Another World," *The Architectural Review* 156 (August 1974): 68–70, 70.



These architectural writers also become disoriented by the fragmented British landscape. Describing the area near Foster's Modern Art Glass Building, they state "it is a confused no-man's-land, the sort of area that Gertrude Stein had in mind when she said, 'There is no there there.'"<sup>42</sup> This reference to Stein seems strange because she is describing the erasure of a childhood memory of home. Yet one may interpret "there is no there there," for the *AR* writers, as a moan for the loss of the modernist utopian impulse that was once found among the architectural profession at the time. Since architecture is not defining progress, it is no longer necessary to determine whether the elements found in the landscape belong to the past, present, or future. Hence, the *AR* writers can no longer single out the pylons as out of place and out of time.

## Elsewhere

To find more about architects' and writers' conception of a post-industrial society, it is useful to turn to the *AR*'s discussion of pylons outside of Britain. One such example is a 1981 article on Japanese architect Kazuo Shinohara's "House Beneath a High Voltage Line."<sup>43</sup> As its name suggests, the design of the three-storey house is shaped by the presence of pylon and high voltage lines. Shinohara carves out part of the house to keep a distance to, but also to respond to the presence of, electrical cables. The house is a rectangular box made of concrete and glass blocks, with the curved roof facing the cables. The *AR*'s writers consider it as an "archetype" of house design, of the calibre of the Palladian villas, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House. To highlight their appreciation, the *AR* writers also state that Shinohara's approach is not to make architecture "a servant of human beings, but architecture that can coexist with humanity."<sup>44</sup> What the *AR* writers find in "House Beneath a High Voltage Line," is a willingness to recognize and confront the presence of a pylon. This Japanese project manifests a courage to devise something different in the late twentieth-century urban environment. In "House Beneath a High Voltage Line," the *AR* detects an attempt to reconcile artistic and cultural pursuit with the impact of modernization and industrialization. This reminds the writers of

42 Winter, "Glass on the Marsh," 55.

43 Lance Knobel, "House, Tokyo, Japan, Architect: Kazuo Shinohara," *The Architectural Review* 170 (September 1981): 179–82.

44 Knobel, "House, Tokyo, Japan, Architect: Kazuo Shinohara," 179.

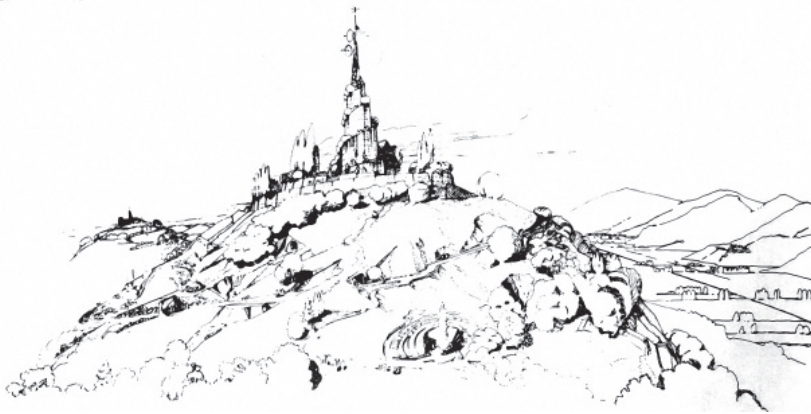


Figure 11.3: “Vallo di Diano,” *The Architectural Review*, December 1981.

the early modernists. However, “House Beneath a High Voltage Line” is a rare instance in the 1980s when the *AR* elaborates on the pylons because they have become an essential part of the building’s architectural expression. Although pylons can be found in photos of other projects, the *AR* writers do not comment on their relationship to the buildings and surrounding landscapes.

Also in 1981, the magazine introduced a town planning project that may be regarded as a return to the “post-industrial” vision articulated by Penty, Ashbee, and Morris. The project, Citta Vallo di Diano, in the Campania region of southern Italy, was proposed by Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi.<sup>45</sup> Portoghesi was an influential figure in postmodern architecture, who re-introduced classical elements and local culture into twentieth-century architecture. The Citta Vallo di Diano proposal can be described as baroque, resembling Pope Sixtus V’s plan to create landmark buildings connected by avenues in Rome. In Portoghesi’s design, pylons and masts are used to demarcate the nodes of the region. These structures crown the hilltops around Citta Vallo di Diano and frame the major motorways (fig. 11.3). Pylons, masts, and spiral radio towers are placed among buildings designed with modern functions and technology that are, nevertheless, draped in the veneer of architectural classicism.<sup>46</sup>

Portoghesi also contextualized his vision as a response to post-industrialization. In his article “The Post-industrial City: Between Zeal and Indolence,” Portoghesi argues that the Vallo di Diano project “rebalance[es] the conflict

45 Peter Buchanan, “Vallo Di Diano,” *The Architectural Review* 170 (December 1981): 353–58.

46 Buchanan, “Vallo Di Diano,” 355–56.

between city and countryside, between large and small settlements” in a post-industrial society.<sup>47</sup> The cities, he observes, are either dominated by the logic of advanced industrialization or mythicized through preservation. Portoghesi points out that the idealization of the old urban fabric and working-class culture not only hinders the revitalization of decaying centres, but also undermines the intertwining of productive activities that give urban centres their remarkable character. Meanwhile, the urban peripheries and rural areas which have been largely neglected by modernist architecture, also need immediate design interventions. For Portoghesi, Citta Vallo di Diano is a solution to reconcile these conflicts. He positions the project as,

Creatively interpret[ing] these differences that mark the passage between an industrial civilisation, homologated on the model of mechanical production, and a post-industrialised civilisation, which tries to put man back as the centre of his vision of the world.<sup>48</sup>

Portoghesi’s vision is largely reactionary: his architectural solution relies heavily on a nostalgic image of Italian town culture and liberal traditions. Citta Vallo di Diano, in this regard, can be seen as a continuation of the post-industrial sentiment found in the *AR*’s pages. Not unlike the proposal for Bingham’s Melcombe, structures for twentieth-century technologies and functions are concealed in historic built and urban forms. Moreover, in their critique on the problems in contemporary architecture and planning, the designers tend to turn to nostalgic images of pre-industrialized townscapes as their proposed solution.

However, something is also different in Portoghesi’s work: he argues that architecture can be employed to address the psychological burden found in a post-industrial society. In his book *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society*, Portoghesi states that the Citta Vallo di Diano proposal is an attempt to grapple with the socio-economic and environmental disparities brought by industrialization, as well as the new challenges found in post-industrial economies. He points out that the proposal seeks to counter “the culture of the elite,” the “degradation of bourgeois culture,” and the “jealousy of identity and size of urban centre” in urban discourse.<sup>49</sup> These issues are intertwined with the impasse found in 1980s architecture and

47 Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 75.

48 Portoghesi, *Postmodern*, 77.

49 Portoghesi, *Postmodern*, 77.

urbanism: cities no longer result from economic and cultural development, instead they are created to boost economic and technological growth.<sup>50</sup> Architecture and urbanism become at once the product, the sites of production and consumption, and the residue of the post-industrial economy.

The purpose of Citta Villo di Diano and its network of masts and towers is to reconnect areas with economic, social, and environmental disparities. Also noteworthy is that the design of Citta Villo di Diano pivots on the experience of the working-class community, whose lives were shaped by industrialization and de-industrialization. Unlike previous *AR*'s coverage of the pylons, the attention is no longer limited to the protection of the landscape, the visual integrity, or the tourist's gaze. In Citta Villo di Diano, Portoghesi argues that the pylons, masts, and spiral radio towers are designed to be beacons that will reconnect the fragmented post-industrial society. Portoghesi's design suggests that although these structures may not be able to bring manufacturing jobs back to the towns, architecture can still play an active role in shaping political and civic identities.

The Citta Villo di Diano is conceived as a theoretical proposal—no plans were put forward for its realization. As a result, its exploration of the human experience in a post-industrial society did not draw more attention from the architectural profession at the time. Instead, the project and other works by Portoghesi were largely consumed by the debates on postmodern architecture: they were deemed nostalgic and regressive.<sup>51</sup> The *AR* writers also stressed that although “the aspiration, lifestyle, and technology he intends to accommodate are modern, there is little modern about Portoghesi's form.”<sup>52</sup>

This pylon-spotting exercise in the *AR* has shed light on a few key forces that drive the postmodern shift of architecture. First, we see how reverence for historical architecture has been maintained in the magazine. Meanwhile, the desire for a more accessible architectural language—whether it is through a return to the past or the use of ubiquitous industrial materials—also contributed to the postmodern turn of architecture. The question of whether architecture and urban design can drive societal progress looms large in the pages of the *AR*, which, in turn, signposts the sense of disorientation and alienation felt by the architectural profession in the later part of the twentieth century. Lastly, the *AR*'s review of Citta Villo di Diano and article

50 Aspa Gospodini, “Portraying, Classifying and Understanding the Emerging Landscapes in the Post-Industrial City,” *Cities* 23, no. 5 (2006): 311–30.

51 Portoghesi, *The Presence of the Past*.

52 Buchanan, “Vallo Di Diano,” 355.

on the “post-industrial” interior also reflected the stagnation in architectural culture. By the 1980s, the all-encompassing critique found in the journal’s previous coverage of the pylons had largely faded away.

Following the pylons in the *AR*, we have explored the post-industrial landscape in Britain through the views of architects and architectural writers. The scenery portrayed in the magazine’s pages diverged from the prominent definition of post-industrial society, including the replacement of manufacturing industries by services and knowledge-based jobs. Although one can see in the pages of the *AR*, an emphasis on technology and leisure, the architectural writers used the term predominately for imagining an alternative modernity, yet to arrive. In the pages of *AR*, the longing for a different form of industrial and societal organization has been projected onto the coverage of the pylons. The pylons are employed as a visual cue for the dominating form of industrialization that is alienating and destructive. Moreover, the pylons and wirescapes are part of the *AR* writers’ voyeurism. Discussions about these structures redirect attention to areas that are underrepresented in the mainstream British architectural discourses. The coverage of the pylons seeks to evoke at once the curiosity, admiration, and perhaps frustration in the readers. The images of the pylons and wirescapes elicit emotional responses from the readers not because of their architectural value, but because they seem to signpost more significant societal and cultural issues. In short, the pylons are used by the *AR* writers to present the reality, their critique, and their imagination of post-industrialization.

The confusion found in the *AR* coverage is exacerbated by the unusual articulation and periodization of post-industrialism that has been developing in British architecture since the early twentieth century. The term was first used in the early twentieth century, during the heyday of industrialization. In the 1950s, when the post-industrial sentiments were printed in the “Townscape” campaign, Britain was still undergoing rapid industrialization, urbanization, and modernization in the aftermath of the Second World War. Hence, in the 1980s when notable transformations in economy, politics, and societal organization were occurring, are they talking about a “post-industrialism” or a “post-post-industrialism”? The picture of the Modern Art Glass Building, for example, reveals that the post-industrial landscape may contain elements from industrializing, even pre-industrialized economies. The Citta Villo di Diano proposal, meanwhile, put forward a vision in which technological advancement and economic growth creates a supposedly “new” architectural culture that resembled a distant past. Portoghesi’s post-industrial city seems closer to those imagined by the architectural writers of the early twentieth century, than to those discussed within

the post-industrial of the 1980s. By seeking an alternative, architects and designers at times inadvertently return to a past that may not have existed. Following the pylons, we also locate trajectories leading to this convoluted situation. We find a reluctance to engage directly with industrial culture: either by romanticizing the industrial aesthetic or by rejecting structures that seem out of place in a historic or natural landscape. The architects and writers invented myriad ways to conceal, undermine, or ignore the conditions and consequences of industrialization and post-industrialization. In their pursuits for something different, the *AR* writers did not always pay attention to the workers and inhabitants of the industrial landscape. The neglect, found in the pages of this influential architectural magazine, may be seen as a predecessor to the more recent “ruin porn” images. The various approaches to industrial changes resulted in notably different designs, and in turn, further fragmentation of the post-industrial landscape.

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## About the Author

**Juliana Yat Shun Kei** is a lecturer in architecture at the University of Liverpool. Her research explores various notions of the environment in twentieth-century architecture. Her current work investigates how British institutions invented the term "built environment" in an attempt to reshape the country's political economy.



## 12. Picturing Post-industrial Societies in Franco-Belgian Comic Books

*Nicolas Verschueren*

### Abstract

Over the past twenty years, Franco-Belgian comic books have been subject to significant transformations with the emergence of non-fiction comic books, sociological studies adapted to comic book formats, and graphic novels. In this context of renewal, this chapter aims to explore how authors of Franco-Belgian comic books have portrayed the emergence of a post-industrial society. It is then possible to distinguish four topics underlined by these authors, namely the disappearance of the working class or its invisibility, the emergence of cultural regeneration schemes on former coal mining sites and, in particular, the Louvre-Lens project, the generational transition between fathers and sons, and finally the responses of the working class to de-industrialization.

**Keywords:** Franco-Belgian post-industrialization; comics; working class; resistance; visibility

This chapter will cast a light on specific Franco-Belgian comic books in which authors pinpoint de-industrialization or consider post-industrial society as a key component in their scenarios.<sup>1</sup> I see them as distinct from post-apocalyptic comics in which the emergence of a post-industrial society is a consequence of a disaster that deeply changes human society. The portrayal of an explicitly post-industrial world in comic books is restricted to a narrow circle of productions. Nevertheless, academic research on the aesthetics of de-industrialization has not yet considered comic books as sources to

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<sup>1</sup> For the specificities of Franco-Belgian comic books: Matthew Screech, *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes Dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2005).

investigate how post-industrial landscapes and social relations are pictured in those landscapes. Here, I consider comic book series such as *Le combat ordinaire* by Manu Larcenet (*Ordinary Victory*, 2003–8), which focuses on the disappearance of the French working class, *L'art du chevalement* by Loo Hui Phang and Philippe Dupuy (*The Art of a Mining Frame*, 2013), *Sortir de terre* by Jean-Luc Loyer and Xavier Bétaucourt (*Emerging from the Ground*, 2018) about the cultural regeneration programme in Lens which included the opening of the Louvre Lens in 2012. With *Les gueules noires* (*Black Faces*, 2021), I analyse how the authors Gilles Zampano and Jack Domon humorously depict the decline of the coal industry through children's eyes. Finally, I examine how Louis Thellier in *Johnson m'a tuer* (*Johnson Kills Me*, 2014) and Benjamin Carle in *Sortie d'usine* (*Leaving the Factory*, 2021) portray the de-industrialization process from the workers' point of view. Before proceeding to the exploration of how post-industrialism is pictured in these comic books, it is necessary to observe contemporary transformations in the editing process of comic books. Of particular interest is the critical and commercial success of non-fiction comic books, and the evolution of the relationship between comic book production and academic work.

The relationship between comics and academic scholarship follows a double evolution. First, for the past twenty years, numerous comic books devoted to social issues, journalistic investigations, and political topics have been published. They have been generally called “non-fiction” comic books.<sup>2</sup> Though the trend began in the 1960s, it is mainly since the 2000s that this type of publication has had growing critical success alongside the emergence of the graphic novel, opening up a wealth of opportunities for previously neglected themes. In the 2000s, comics started crossing the border between “entertainment” and “art,” and began to address contemporary, everyday issues, instead of focusing on fantasy narratives. The works of Art Spiegelman, Jiro Taniguchi, or Romain Renard ceased to be regarded as part of popular culture. In addition, comic books more generally are no longer considered media for children and young adults.<sup>3</sup> Exploring everything from social issues such as inequality, democracy, racism, to more personal, autobiographical concerns, these works propose a more sophisticated approach than traditional comics for children. They offer original narrative perspectives based on wide-ranging graphic styles. In

2 Randy Duncan, Michael Ray Taylor, and David Stoddard, *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir, and Nonfiction* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

3 In Belgium and France, comic book artistic productions are considered to be a legitimate art, designated the ninth art.

fact, recent publications testify to the subversive intelligence of comic books and their ability to raise important social and political issues which, according to Pascal Robert, have been overlooked for too long.<sup>4</sup> Among these, documentary comic books have become a popular sub-genre featuring the work of artists such as Etienne Davodeau, Joe Sacco, and Marjane Satrapi. Hence, many social and economic issues have been taken up in comic book panels and speech balloons, allowing new, serious perspectives. For instance, Philippe Squarzoni in *Saison brune* (*Brown Season*, 2012) presents a scientific and political study of climate change, and Shaun Tan in the wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) explores the emigration experience.<sup>5</sup> In Japan, Kazuto Tatsuta has drawn and described with precision the working conditions of the cleanup workers at Fukushima. American comic book authors since the 2008 financial crisis have often portrayed economic inequalities, social changes, and collective mobilization.<sup>6</sup>

Second, academics are increasingly engaged in the study of comic books as a source for their research and, as suggested by Ivan Jablonka, comics have become a medium for publication and dissemination of research results.<sup>7</sup> For example, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980) was adapted into comic book form by Mike Konopacki and Paul Buhle in 2008. More recently, *Une histoire populaire de la France* by Gérard Noiriel was translated into a comic book soon after its publication (2018 and 2021).<sup>8</sup>

## Picturing Post-industrialism in Franco-Belgian Comic Books

The interest in complicated societal issues is now part of the comic book market. Authors and editors have been emboldened to tackle sensitive subjects and, this new way of exploring contemporary social changes and

4 Pascal Robert, *La bande dessinée, une intelligence subversive* (Villeurbanne: Presses de l'Enssib, 2018), 15.

5 Shaun Tan, *The Arrival* (New York: Levine, 2007); Philippe Squarzoni, *Saison brune* (Paris: Delcourt, 2012).

6 Nickie Phillips and Staci Strobl, "Global Capitalism as Blood Sacrifice: Mainstream American Comic Books and Depictions of Economic Inequality," *Critical Criminology* 30 (June 2022): 821–42.

7 Ivan Jablonka, "Histoire et bandes dessinées," *La vie des idées*, November 18, 2014, accessed August 9, 2022, <https://laviedesidees.fr/Histoire-et-bande-dessinee.html>; Sylvain Lesage, "Écrire l'histoire en images: Les historiens et la tentation de la bande dessinée," *Le mouvement social* 4, no. 269–70 (2019): 47–65.

8 Paul Buhle, Mike Konopacki, and Howard Zinn, *A People's History of American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2008); Gérard Noiriel, *Une histoire populaire de la France* (Paris: Delcourt, 2021).

challenges has created growing interest among readers, including those not usually comic book readers. Among the important societal issues, the emergence of a post-industrial society has also attracted the attention of comic book authors in France and Belgium. One of the questions raised in this chapter will be to understand how authors portray the emergence of post-industrial society. While some photographers and urban explorers often draw on an aesthetic of ruination, I will demonstrate why comic book authors have so far avoided such a visual language. The surprising result of this research is that the post-industrial world of comic books is filled with workers, history, legacies, and characters. For these authors, the apparent disappearance of industries should not mean the disappearance of the working classes and their values. In short, through their drawings and narratives, comic books want to give a face and a voice to a world that has been rendered invisible and mute. Engraving the faces of workers and recording their history are ways to immortalize the working classes.

There is sometimes a personal connection with the industrial world, some authors come from a coal-mining family or have been workers themselves. The relationship between comic authors and the working class deserves a more detailed study. Indeed, according to Magnus Nilsson, many connections are to be found between working-class and comic representation.

By refusing to erase workers from their narratives, comic book authors seem to resist the advent of a post-industrial world without workers.<sup>9</sup> They have, for instance, examined the working world by questioning the meaning of work, the industrial restructuring process, and social protest within the factory.<sup>10</sup> This research is based on the exploration of seven comic books leading to an assessment of post-industrial representation. The selection of Franco-Belgian comics focusing on post-industrialism strives to maintain the presence of workers through four characteristics: visibility/invisibility, cultural regeneration and the industrial past, humour and new generations, and testimonies of industrial restructuring.

First, with the four albums of Larcenet's series *Le combat ordinaire*, I will examine one of the first comic book portraits of a disappearing working-class and analyse how the author tries to emphasize the consequence of

9 The relationship between comics and the working class is an ongoing field of research. See, for example, Jean-Paul Géhin, "La bande dessinée montre le travail de l'intérieur. 1. Un regard à la fois documenté et intimiste," *Hypotheses*, May 16, 2018, accessed August 2, 2021, <https://itti.hypotheses.org/818>.

10 Tristan Thill and Zoé Thouron, *Florange: Une lutte d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Dargaud, 2014); Laurent Galandon and Damien Vidal, *Lip: Des héros ordinaires* (Paris: Dargaud, 2014); Sandrine Kerion, *Mon rond-point dans ta gueule* (Saint-Avertin: La Boîte à Bulles, 2021).

its disappearance, especially in the shipbuilding industry. Marco, the main character in *Le combat ordinaire*, is born in a working-class family and becomes a professional photographer who decides to immortalize workers' faces. It is through the lens of a photographer, then, that Larcenet wants to render these workers visible before they become invisible.<sup>11</sup>

Second, authors approach the question of the post-industrial process in connection with cultural regeneration projects, for which the specific case of the Louvre Lens annex was the subject of two comic books. *L'art du chevalement* and *Sortir de terre* brought to the fore the transition between coal mining and the regeneration of Lens as a place of cultural consumption.

A third focus will be on the use of humour to represent a post-industrial society while preserving historical authenticity and the coal miners' heritage. In *Les gueules noires*, Jack Domon and Gilles Zampano tell the story of dismissed miners' sons who decide to create a football team which temporarily restores pride to a hopeless former coal-mining community, presumably in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Women are now taking the active role at home and accusing their husbands of a lack of combativeness.<sup>12</sup> The perspective in *Les gueules noires* alludes to 1990s and 2000s British comedy movies, such as *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000).

Finally, the fourth case study looks at the restructuring process itself, and the meaning of the manufacturing decline that ultimately leads to working-class protests and resistance in France and Belgium in Thellier's *Johnson m'a tuer* and Carle in *Sortie d'usine*. A common thread runs through these four portrayals of post-industrialism in comic books: they all focus on the experiences of human characters, particularly workers, while urban wastelands and industrial ruins are secondary.

### Ordinary Victories or Fighting against Working-Class Invisibility

In 2003, Larcenet published the first volume of his series *Le combat ordinaire* which was awarded the prize for best album at the Angoulême Festival in 2004. This series was released in four volumes between 2003 and 2008 and gathered significant commercial and critical success.<sup>13</sup> The narrative follows

11 Manu Larcenet, *Le combat ordinaire* (Palaiseau: Dargaud, 2003).

12 Jack Domon and Gilles Zampano, *Les gueules noires* (Clichy: Casa éditions, 2021).

13 More than 600,000 copies of the first album have been sold, accessed March 31, 2023, [https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/manu-larcenet-pour-etre-authentique-l-art-doit-etre-proche-de-la-folie\\_1818506.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/manu-larcenet-pour-etre-authentique-l-art-doit-etre-proche-de-la-folie_1818506.html).

the journey of Marco, a young photographer, suffering from panic attacks, whose concern about being a father runs through the whole series. In the background of his personal history lies the dark fate of the shipbuilding industry where his father worked before retiring. The uncertainty about the industry's fate echoes his own anxieties about the burden of the past, including family and French history. Following a short tour of the old shipbuilding plant, Marco decides to carry out a photographic report on the vanishing working class, a way to immortalize what matters, to ensure the transmission of working-class values between the worker and the artist, the father and his son.

Industrial architecture, storage buildings, and workshops are absent from Marco's illustrations which focus on workers' faces. In scrutinizing the workers' facial expressions, Marco/Manu portrays the last days of the working class and discovers the upheavals of a class once considered as Promethean. Larcenet illustrates his comic strips with Marco's photographs of workers' faces, thus making more complex and intriguing the visual composition of *Le combat ordinaire*. He accompanies this with a subtext reflecting the introspection of the photographer, Marco, who makes the link between the approaching death of his father, a former worker, and a potential analogy with the disappearance of the working class. The unknown situation that Marco must bear in the face of his father's death is akin to a world without workers. The disappearance of the industrial world in which he grew up shatters his beliefs and everything that has contributed to building him as a man, an adult, and an artist. The photographs focus solely on the workers' faces, outside any specific context. These faces are depicted through precise cross hatching, more precise than those of other characters' faces, as if the workers were the only real, living characters. While a few workers smile, most of them have closed expressions on their faces, pursed lips, and their gaze is fixed on the photographer's lens. In the second volume, Larcenet explores the recent transformation of a working class confronted with its planned disappearance. One of the effects is the emergence of an extreme right vote among workers in 1995. It is a time when *Le Front National* was considered the main working-class political party in France.<sup>14</sup> Resignation and desertion are now shown as the dominant feelings of a powerless working class. One of Marco's first photographs of which he is proud shows the closed expression of Bastounet's face, a childhood friend and now a

14 Florent Gougou, "Les ouvriers et le vote Front National: Les logiques d'un réalignement électoral," in *Les faux-semblants du Front national*, ed. Sylvain Crépon (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2015), 323–34.

worker who voted for an extreme right party. Watching the cold, hard, and resigned face of his former friend, Marco tries to understand this changing world, the working class attracted by speeches of *Le Front National*. He concludes by claiming, “what a sad world.” The loss of industrial landmarks and the end of the working class are embodied in the degenerative disease that affects Marco’s father. The parallel between these two realities of the public and private which deeply affect the photographer undermines all Marco’s certainties.<sup>15</sup> Workers are no longer portrayed as the potential actors of social or political revolution. Likewise, their spirit of resistance is on the wane. In a long monologue, Pablo, an old worker, explains to Marco how strikes are no longer an efficient means of action, capitalism can now claim victory over the class struggle. He concludes that, “denying our defeat doesn’t make any difference.”

The last volume is partly devoted to workers’ protests as they try to maintain industrial activities. But these acts of protest are a swan song for the working classes, showing that their fate is henceforth sealed by media indifference when Marco’s chief editor refuses to publish images of workers’ protests.<sup>16</sup> All scenes picturing demonstrations, strikes, and speeches are silent, without text. They illustrate a well-known story, the outcome of which is inevitable. The announcement of the final plant closure is not written but known. The elderly worker Pablo understands the inevitability from Marco through simple body language. Marco stands behind the old worker with the only background being seagulls flying in the wind. The shipyard is missing or barely sketched. Marco’s chief editor resumes the restructuring process of destitution in a direct sentence: “There will be compassion but no revolution, readers are looking for the new Pop Idol and will not take to the streets in an outburst of revolt.”<sup>17</sup> The irrevocability of industrial restructuring has indeed become part of the discourse contributing to render the working class invisible. The last pages describe the transition from the industrial site to areas of consumption and leisure. This follows the buildings’ destruction before the closed eyes of former workers photographed by Marco.

Drawing photographs of workers reinforces the impression of realism and the materiality of a disappearing world. When Larcenet draws his characters, the physical details, especially the faces, are roughly sketched, the expressions of the eyes are reduced to a simple white circle, a dot, or a

15 Manu Larcenet, *Le combat ordinaire*, vol. 2, *Les quantités négligeables* (Palaiseau: Dargaud, 2004), 37.

16 Manu Larcenet, *Le combat ordinaire*, vol. 4, *Planter des clous* (Palaiseau: Dargaud, 2008), 36.

17 Larcenet, *Le combat ordinaire*, 4:36.

line. But the drawings of photographs of workers are more complex, more precise, and more realistic. All of Marco's photographs materialize his environment. In addition, his images depict what is beyond his understanding; he photographs his father's workshop before emptying it, the same way that he photographs the workers before they disappear. In the four volumes, we observe the pervasive presence of nostalgia which is emphasized in many French comic books exploring working-class legacy.<sup>18</sup> Baru, an Italian-born comic book writer whose father worked in the steel industry in the French region of Lorraine, offers an interpretation of the period between 1945 and 1975, *les trentes années glorieuses* (*The Golden Age*) through the eyes of children. Although Baru does not hide the fact that this Golden Age was also a time of violence, especially in the French context, thanks to multiple references to the Algerian War of Independence, nostalgia soaks almost all the narratives related to the last days of the working class. The same kind of nostalgia forms the background of Etienne Davodeau's comic books dedicated to his parents' working-class origins and their trade union activism, *Rural: Chronique d'une collision politique* (*Rural: The Story of a Political Collision*, 2001).<sup>19</sup>

Showing workers when factories are closed or are about to close definitively, these authors offer a working-class visualization of the post-industrial world, focusing on the emptiness of spaces deprived of their working-class soul. In this way, the authors avoid industrial ruination aesthetics through their focus on making present the impending human absence in a bid to rescue the heritage of working-class struggles, the shared sense of solidarity and activism. This omnipresence of workers in cultural productions challenges common perceptions and discourses on the irreversibility of industrialization, and the imminent post-industrial society.

### From Coal Mine Gallery to Art Gallery

Regenerating former industrial sites takes various forms, such as the transformation to a place of consumption (Manufaktura shopping centre in Łódź, Poland), a nature park (Emscher Park in the Ruhr Region, Germany), an industrial heritage museum (Kelham Island Museum in Sheffield, UK) or a

18 On this post-industrial nostalgia see Tim Strangleman, "Smokestack Nostalgia, Ruin Porn or Working-Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 23–37.

19 Etienne Davodeau, *Les mauvaises gens: Une histoire de militants* (Palaiseau: Delcourt, 2018).



place of cultural decentralization in which cultural institutions are moved from cities to partially abandoned areas (Le Grand Hornu in the Borinage, Belgium). One of the most ambitious cultural decentralizations can be found in the former Nord-Pas-de-Calais coalfield in France with the opening of the Louvre Lens annex in 2012. This relocation of part of the Paris collection to a former coalfield followed the Guggenheim Museum's establishment of the Bilbao site in its attempt to decentralize and democratize access to cultural materials.<sup>20</sup> Reflections on what might be seen or interpreted as an improbable encounter between a Parisian cultural atmosphere and coal-mining experience have inspired comic book authors in two distinct ways: the first drawing on investigative journalism with Loyer and Bétaucourt's *Sortir de terre*, the other offering a more figurative depiction of this cultural regeneration with Phang and Dupuy's *L'art du chevalement*.

In *L'art du chevalement*, Phang and Dupuy carry the reader through a dream-like journey from the bottom of a mine shaft to the exploration of the Louvre Lens galleries.<sup>21</sup> The reader follows the coal miner Orféo and his horse on an oneiric experience for which they are suddenly transported a century into the future, that is, when the Louvre Lens has replaced the former mining structure. At this moment, all voices become silent and artworks start to communicate with the young miner. At certain times, it is difficult to pinpoint which part of the history is "real" and which part belongs to the dream experience. The exploration of an art exhibition fuels Orféo's imagination where past experiences about love, friendship, and working conditions mirror artistic discovery. When the comic book was released, coal mining was no longer the heartbeat of social and economic activity in Lens, and the Louvre was welcoming its first visitors. When Orféo discovers the museum, the working-class experience in the coal industry appears to be increasingly evanescent while artworks start to converse with Orféo through speech balloons, as if they are real characters. This comic book artistry creates a two-fold discovery; Orféo finding the meaning of art while artworks learn about the art of mining. The encounter through dialogues between the miner and artworks serves to create a dialogue between the two worlds, which coexist without one replacing the other. As such, the establishment of the Louvre Lens would not mean the erasure of coal-mining history, or forgetting coal miners' sacrifices by replacing them with cultural exhibitions. In a sense, the opening of this museum could lead to a

20 Guy Baudelle, "The New Louvre in Lens: A Regionally Embedded National Project," *European Planning Studies* 23, no. 8 (2015): 1476–93.

21 Philippe Dupuy and Loo Hui Phang, *L'art du chevalement* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2013).

gentrification or a socio-cultural transformation that could ultimately make the coal-mining history disappear. This conversation underlines a sense of continuity in blurring lines between past and present, between working-class experiences and artistic production. The precision and quality of the miner's work is comparable to the sculptor's skills while Orféo discovers an unknown sculpture. From the other side, artistic artefacts become upset by the revelation of working conditions underground while recognizing workers' hand movements and techniques as craftsmanship—laying a wedge or timbering would be an art form in action. The comic book's title underlines the authors' willingness not to erase industrial history, but rather, to leave it in the sunlight while post-industrial projects are placed in its shadow. In other words, this cultural decentralization does not mean forgetting the industrial legacy, but rather, claims that it should be maintained alongside new post-industrial perspectives. In the end, the comic book sets apart the dream-like narrative and becomes more realistic when the reader follows old Orféo, visiting the Louvre Lens where he associates industrial past and post-industrial present, labour and art. Works of art cease to float in the air; they now interact with Orféo and give way to museum visitors, among whom is Orféo. The reader is led to question whether what they have read and perceived is the fruit of the old miner's imagination confronted with his past and his discovery of this new artistic environment.

These simultaneously journalistic and kaleidoscopic descriptions of post-industrialism in Lens take centre stage in *Sortir de terre*.<sup>22</sup> The two authors interviewed many participants of this regional regeneration, especially those active in the Louvre Lens project. The authors observed the reactions of the population towards the social and economic transformation of this former coal-mining area, asking them also about their perception of the Louvre Lens. They adopted a documentary and journalistic approach while multiplying perspectives in an attempt to provide a realistic and nuanced view. Like Phang and Dupuy, Loyer and Bétaucourt investigate the meaning of cultural decentralization with the opening of the Louvre Lens. Loyer, born in northern France to a family of coal miners, had already explored this social context in several comic books.<sup>23</sup> Bétaucourt grew up in the industrial north of France and became a journalist. They first collaborated on the comic book, *Le Grand A (The Big A)*, (2016) in which they unveiled the

22 Xavier Bétaucourt and Jean-Luc Loyer, *Sortir de terre "à 198 kilomètres de la pyramide..."* (Tournai: éditions de la Gouttière, 2019).

23 Jean-Luc Loyer, *Sang Noir: La catastrophe de Courrières* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2013); Jean-Luc Loyer, *Les mangeurs de cailloux* (Paris: Delcourt, 2001).

transformation of former mines into a commercial supermarket area. In *Le Grand A*, the authors highlighted how a place of industrial production became a site of consumption and showed the socio-economic implications of this transformation.<sup>24</sup> Thus, as collaborators, they questioned the history of consumption and offered a sociological analysis of post-industrialism in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. *Le Grand A* examined these events through questions of long-term unemployment, the destruction of social structures, private indebtedness, and the rise of right-wing extremism in post-industrial locations. The establishment of the Louvre Lens was already mentioned in *Le Grand A* as a two-fold coalfield “regeneration,” achieved through material and cultural consumerism. In fact, their artistic collaboration started in 2003 during the restructuring process of the Metaleurop foundry, also located in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais coalfield.<sup>25</sup> In their three comic books, Loyer and Bétaucourt explore a journalistic approach inside the ninth art, a graphic non-fiction of socio-economic transformations in former French industrial areas such as the Nord-Pas-de-Calais coalfield. In *Sortir de terre*, they used the same method, interviewing those touched by the Louvre Lens project, including politicians, civil servants, museum guides, activists opposing the project, and ordinary citizens. The interviews covered a wide range of issues, such as the important role of the famous local football team (RC Lens), economic and urban regeneration, and cultural renewal. These numerous social interactions inspired Loyer and Bétaucourt and impacted how they charted the changes of this post-industrial coalfield. Indeed, social interactions and historical explanations moved to the forefront of the book whereas the industrial and historical background was lightly displayed through sepia drawings. Inhabitants and conversations filled up almost every panel, authors left little room for readers’ interpretation.

With this journalistic approach, Loyer and Bétaucourt portray the residents’ reactions to post-industrial challenges, such as the creation of an industrial heritage museum, new urban planning, cultural decentralization, and sports events. This kaleidoscopic focus brings out the debate on how a post-industrial landscape or society can be reshaped without erasing its coal-mining history or contributing to an industrial nostalgia. The inhabitants’ reactions to the Louvre Lens reveal self-deprecatory feelings, expressing their scepticism about these cultural and urban regeneration projects. Through

24 Xavier Bétaucourt and Jean-Luc Loyer, *Le Grand A: Il mange 195 jours de votre vie* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2016).

25 Xavier Bétaucourt and Jean-Luc Loyer, *Noir métal: Au cœur de Metaleurop* (Luçon: Delcourt, 2006).



Figure 12.1: History and pedagogy through drawings and words. Xavier Bétaucourt and Jean-Luc Loyer, *Sortir de terre* "à 198 kilomètres de la pyramide..." (Tournai: éditions de la Gouttière, 2019), 19.

the pages of *Sortir de terre*, the complete absence of ruination aesthetics is remarkable, while we notice the omnipresence of numerous talkative residents and actors sharing their feelings and impressions of post-industrial transformation on a visual level. Far from depicting a gloomy atmosphere, Bétaucourt and Loyer shed light on vines growing on the edges of a slag heap where children used to slide onto its steep and slippery ramps. In a sense, throughout their comic book, they focus mainly on the positive transformation of the Lens neighbourhood whereas *Le Grand A* and *Noir métal* depict a depressing social atmosphere in a post-industrial society.

Both albums, *L'art du chevalement* and *Sortir de terre*, fiercely memorialize industrial legacies through numerous references to coal miners' sacrifices and working conditions. The cultural regeneration of the former coalfield should not make us forget the industrial past or render invisible this lost world. The authors have linked cultural regeneration schemes with industrial history using different narratives and graphic representations. They observe the cultural process of de-industrialization by placing the Louvre Lens project within a long history. They also disregard sarcasms about cultural decentralization in a population still suffering from the aftermath of de-industrialization. Thus, Phang and Dupuy elaborate on a dialectical relationship between coal miners' working conditions and industrial history

on one hand, and artistic works and cultural history on the other. Cultural regeneration should not mean cultural de-industrialization, but rather, creating a space where artistic and social experiences can be combined. Here, they suggest, there is not only a place for working-class memory and pride, but also, the possibility of picturing a common future.

### **The Kids Aren't Alright? Working-Class Pride Reborn in a Post-Industrial Community**

Children play an important role in the visual representations of post-industrialism. Similarities can be drawn with the Italian post-war context and the force of children in neo-realist films such as Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the father-son relationship is prevalent in other post-industrial cultural representations and can be investigated to pinpoint its importance in the restructuring process. In 2021, the release of Domon and Zampano's *Les gueules noires* followed a similar pattern. In the publication, the wives of unemployed miners are the living force of the former mining community, while their sons restore a sense of working-class pride through the emergence of a new football team named *Les gueules noires*. Unlike other comic books discussed in this chapter, industrial wastelands and ruins, empty spaces, and vacant buildings are the kids' playground, thus creating the space for a football field. Numerous post-industrial commonplaces are displayed throughout the comic book. These include worker depression, drinking problems, and debates on migrant integration. Thanks to the great success of the new football team, the local community regains its pride and ability to take action to change its depressing fate. In addition to the predictable scenario and a feel-good story, Domon and Zampano regularly summon memories of coal-mining working conditions, pit disasters, and the pneumoconiosis that still haunts the industrial ruins, especially in the "room of the hanged men."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, this comic book should not be taken too seriously, and this interpretation may exaggerate the naïve narrative of a few kids managing a new football team in a post-industrial world. Indeed, films such as *Kinky Boots* (Julian Jarrold, 2005), *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), and *Billy Elliot* explore the reversal of gender or

26 Lorenzo Borgotallo, "The Orphan Child and New Ways of Looking at the World," in *A Companion to Italian Cinema*, ed. Frank Burke (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 121–38.

27 The room of the hanged men is a classical depiction of mineworkers at work, a room where their clothes are suspended in the air to avoid any contact with coal dust.

question working-class masculinity in a post-industrial British society.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning two features of *Les gueules noires*. First, as stated, Domon and Zampano share a comparable depiction of post-industrialism with recent British comedy films. Thus, we might question the commercial success of these various artistic productions.<sup>29</sup> In these post-industrial communities, women replace men as the main breadwinners, also providing security, pride, and fighting spirit. Children are in a mid-way situation between respect and partial esteem for the father and the desire for change, looking for a different future. They personify a transitional period after the decline or restructuring of heavy industries. They are present to dismantle certitudes, as well as show confidence and force as a social group. Rather than focusing on one artistic form (cinema, comic books, pictures), it is possible to compare these productions beyond local or national study cases.<sup>30</sup> By crossing artistic productions and sociological characteristics of regions dealing with industrial decline, it is therefore possible to propose common and shared conclusions on how post-industrial landscapes are depicted despite their visual and sociological specificity. Second, the authors did not intend to propose an intellectual and sociological overview of French de-industrialization, but rather, to tell and draw a humorous story with universal characters. Yet, behind this simplification of socio-economic consequences of de-industrialization, Domon and Zampano do not erase the industrial past and harsh working conditions. They seem to sense the imperative to recall the weight and importance of social history and the workers' struggles.

## Opposition to the Fate of De-industrialization

The final genre of comic books is those describing workers' reactions to factory closures. Authors pay less attention to the visual depiction of post-industrial areas, choosing to focus on workers' perceptions and understanding of the industrial restructuring process. Examples of this can be found in Larcenet's *Combat ordinaire* (2003–8). However, other authors focus on

28 Kelly Farrell, "Naked Nation: The Full Monty, Working-Class Masculinity, and the British Image," *Men and Masculinities* 6, no. 2 (2003): 119–35.

29 We can also draw some parallels with the commercial success of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008). Jacques Arènes, "Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis: Une géographie du mépris et de l'accueil," *Études* 409, no. 7–8 (2008): 96–97.

30 Lutz Raphaël, *Jenseits von Kohl und Stahl: Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte Westeuropas nach dem Boom* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019).

plant closure and layoff procedures, thus enabling them to question the future of the working class.

Among comic books dealing with post-industrialism, the depiction of workers' protests is the most common approach. Loyer and Bétaucourt's *Noir métal* (*Black Metal*, 2006) was the first comic book in France utterly dedicated to workers' reactions to the de-industrialization process. In 2014, Laurent Galandon and Damien Vidal released *Lip: Des héros ordinaires* (*Lip: Ordinary Heroes*, 2014), a graphic interpretation of one of the most famous French workers' protests in the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1973 and 1976, workers at the watch factory of Lip in Besançon launched a self-management experience, probably the best-known self-management experience in Europe during the 1970s.<sup>31</sup> At that time, Galandon and Vidal's comic book echoed several contemporary experiences of workers trying to reopen their factory after a bankruptcy order. Also, in 2014, Zoé Thouron and Tristan Thil published *Florange: Une lutte d'aujourd'hui* (*Florange: A Contemporary Social Protest*, 2014) with the same editor. It is a non-fiction comic book on the decline of the French steel industry in Lorraine.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, picturing workers' protests in the context of the de-industrialization spread beyond workers and activists involved in these social conflicts. As workers created theatre plays, photo-stories, songs, and novels about their protest movement especially in the 1970s, some also published their own comic books recounting the history of their factory, their actions, their fight to maintain jobs. This is what the worker Louis Thellier undertook in *Johnson m'a tuer*.

In his comic book, Thellier reveals the plant closure process at Johnson Matthey in 2011 near Brussels through his drawings. With the support of workmates, he launches his own spontaneous revolution imagining himself "like an undercover reporter, I write down everything I hear and I draw incessantly."<sup>33</sup> Using his drawing skills, he considers the comic book as the most appropriate means to portray the closing process. Over almost one hundred pages, Thellier explains in detail the workplace atmosphere, the collective decision-making process, workers reactions over the six months of negotiations, and finally, he concludes with two contrasting graphic compositions. First, he portrays a large group photo of smiling and cheering workers. Later, each of them pursues their own paths in disarray

31 Galandon and Vidal, *Lip*.

32 Thil and Thouron, *Florange*.

33 Louis Thellier, *Johnson m'a tuer: Journal de bord d'une usine en lutte* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2014), 15.

and resignation. Second, the final panels show a disused industrial building emptied of its workers, “of its substance.”<sup>34</sup> In these last illustrations of an abandoned site, Thellier reinforces the contrast between a buzzing workplace and a silent industrial carcass. The final six panels are the only ones without characters or speech inserts, strengthening the feeling of emptiness.

As mentioned previously, besides this unique cultural expression of protest, working-class struggles have also aroused the interest of outsiders, such as journalists, activists, and artists. In May 2017, workers of GM&S threatened to blow up their factory to protest the decision to close this automotive subcontractor firm, one of the main industrial employers in the Creuse Department. Benjamin Carle, a young French documentary film director, showed an ongoing interest in social issues related to the de-industrialization process and started to investigate the causes of the restructuring decisions. He explored the reasons why workers considered destroying their factory and what were, ultimately, the consequences of this post-industrial world. With *Sortie d'usine*, perhaps a reference to François Bon's 1982 novel, Carle's narrative is based on a collection of testimonies that result in a book that might be compared to a sociological investigation.<sup>35</sup> Here too, numerous panels, text, and drawings show activists, workers, and former workers wording their own analysis and interpretations. For example, Carle stages himself in the comic book interviewing the actors involved in the restructuring process. To understand the dismissal procedure, he draws his long and complicated interview with the workers' lawyer, who helps him dissect the restructuring process. At another point, Carle interviews the former owner of the factory as a way to understand the history that led to the liquidation of the company and the drying up of its cash flow. In his investigation to understand the causes of the company's closure, Carle brings together micro-history and macro-events, the fate of individuals confronted with globalization, de-industrialization, and tertiarization.

As with the works of Thellier, Loyer and Bétaucourt, or Davodeau, *Sortie d'usine* was built on testimonies, archive documents, and statistical data, and turned out to be a graphic investigation report on the industrial history

34 Thellier, *Johnson m'a tuer*, 95.

35 Jean-Paul Géhin, “Benjamin Carle (scénario) & David López (dessin), *Sortie d'usine. Les GM&S, la désindustrialisation et moi*,” *Images du travail, travail des images* 12 (2022), accessed November 30, 2022, <http://journals.openedition.org/itti/2608>; see François Bon, *Sortie d'usine* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982).



of GM&S. One of the astonishing findings in Carle and Lopez's work is how accurate their impressions are when juxtaposed with the research results of historians such as Jackie Clarke. Clarke examines new forms of working-class invisibility induced by new political and media discourses in which plant closures are similar to environmental disasters.<sup>36</sup> By emphasizing the inevitable dimension of de-industrialization as if it were an unexpected natural event, the authors deconstruct and question the working-class invisibility as far from being a "natural" event.<sup>37</sup> As an investigative reporter, Carle explains that the de-industrialization process affecting this region of France (Creuse), and GM&S in particular, is not an inescapable conclusion of the economic transformation or an unfortunate inevitable event. On the contrary, and in contrast to the media discourse, it shows that this closure is the result of deliberate economic choices leading to its bankruptcy.

## Conclusion

The visualization of a post-industrial society in comic books has become an important graphic representation associated with de-industrialization and the disappearance of the working class. Indeed, the number of comic books dealing with the topics of de-industrialization and post-industrialism is increasing, while comic book authors have developed a growing interest in the exploration of post-industrial issues.<sup>38</sup> This attention stems from the increasing public interest for publications picturing the post-industrial world, an audience going beyond the circle of former workers and their relatives.<sup>39</sup> Among the comics studied or mentioned in this chapter, it is possible to perceive a clear sense of pride for this industrial past, especially when the authors invoke the values of the solidarity and resistance of the disappearing working class. But this positive impression about working-class dignity is not a desire to return to an idealized, romanticized, glorious past. The authors do not hesitate to recall the suffering of the working class. Therefore, the dominant feeling is not (or not only) a melancholy for a bygone

36 Jackie Clarke, "Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France," *Modern & Contemporary France* 19 (2011): 443–58.

37 Benjamin Carle and David Lopez, *Sortie d'usine: Les GM&S, la désindustrialisation et moi* (Paris: Steinkis, 2021), 72–73.

38 In addition to the Franco-Belgian comic books studied in this chapter, we can add the works of Efix and Jean-Pierre Levaray such as *Putain d'usine* (Italy: Petit à Petit, 2019), and Thomas Campi and Vincent Zabus, *Macaroni!* (Belgium: Dupuis, 2016).

39 Strangleman, "Smokestack Nostalgia, Ruin Porn or Working-Class Obituary," 27.

era, but rather, the expression of concern about a future stripped of this industrial and social legacy. The tension between “smokestack nostalgia” and “working-class obituary” (to quote Strangleman) runs through all comic books, even those dealing with the emergence of cultural regeneration, as we have seen in books devoted to the Louvre Lens project. The most surprising element of these comic books is the omnipresence of worker characters, and then, mainly male workers.<sup>40</sup> There is a form of graphic and narrative contradiction in trying to provide such a visual and narrative place to a section of the population which is disappearing or becoming invisible. In a sense, Marco Larcenet’s photographer in *Le combat ordinaire*, embodies those authors and cartoonists seeking to immortalize what matters, to give an image, a voice to the working class that is sinking into oblivion. As a result, these comics barely portray abandoned industrial sites and wastelands. There is no exploration for any kind of post-industrial aesthetic beauty, which might otherwise be appealing to a cartoonist willing to play with light and shadow and striking perspective. Indeed, they do not take inspiration from contemporary sceneries that resemble post-apocalyptic decor, a universe that comic book authors and readers particularly appreciate. The growing practice of urban exploration and industrial ruin photography will perhaps lead to the emergence of this type of graphic novel and comic book, but for the moment, the French and Belgian comic book authors are conducting the work of restoring the working class in this post-industrial world.

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## About the Author

**Nicolas Verschuere**n is Professor of Contemporary History at the Université Libre de Bruxelles where he is also Director of the Institute for European Studies and the research centre of Mondes modernes et contemporains. He is currently writing a book on the history of workers self-management in Belgium.

## 13. Where Is the Artisan?

Post-industrial Alternatives from the Radical  
Design Movement

*Jacob Stewart-Halevy*

### Abstract

Focusing on a few representative projects, this chapter considers how designers involved in the Italian “Radical” design movement managed the contradictions of post-industrial labour. I explore how designers engaged the emerging service economy, artisanal labour, and automated manufacturing in order to consider four distinct topoi: neo-Fordism, worker experience, flexible specialization, and preservationism. These fields help us consider structurally the competing aesthetics and politics of post-industrialism in the long 1960s.

**Keywords:** artisan; design; manufacture; flexible specialization; neo-Fordism; automation

The term “post-industrialism” has largely dissipated from academic and political discourse. Yet, its embrace of technical over democratic solutions to governance, and simultaneous hostility to working-class interests, continues to inform liberal policy across the Global North and its satellites of influence. From the outset, leftist critics have been quick to dismantle the technophilic utopianism of post-industrialism.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after Daniel Bell’s initial lecture “Post-Industrial Society” was published in 1964, Herbert Marcuse warned that “technocratic” administration was

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1 Terry Nichols Clark, “Who Constructed Post-Industrial Society? An Informal Account of a Paradigm Shift at Columbia, Pre-Daniel Bell,” *The American Sociologist* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 23–46; Daniel Bell, “The Post-Industrial Society” (1962), in *Technology and Social Change*, ed. Eli Ginzburg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 44–59.

collapsing the public and private spheres.<sup>2</sup> His argument proved seminal to the resounding critiques of technocracy from the 1968 student-worker movement.<sup>3</sup> By the 1970s, Marxist industrial sociologists entered the fray, spurring analyses of the service economy and “information,” theses on de-industrialization and its restructuring of the economy, alongside currents that linked economy and culture under the rubric of “postmodernity.”<sup>4</sup> Left-theorists have continually dismantled the social-forecasting ideology of the post-industrial utopians by focusing on its historical implications for labour and capital.

A key testing ground for both technocratic and left versions of post-industrialism lies in the field of design. This includes work by designers oriented toward the labour processes that marked post-industrialism from the 1960s to its height in the 1980s in service design, participatory design, postmodern design, and user experience. This chapter explores the notorious “Radical” or “Counter” design movement based in Northern Italy in these crucial decades. Specifically, I consider how designers dealt with transformations in labour, technology, and politics through the material conditions and formal qualities of their work.

In this context, “radicalism” functioned as a placeholder for the competing ideologies of the New Left, not necessarily entailing a set of revolutionary or progressive intentions and outcomes on the part of the designers themselves. Even if the movement’s notional radicalism invoked decolonization, gender equity, worker power, self-management, and much else from the later 1960s onwards, its ideologies allowed for different value projects with various levels of commitment. These differences begin to explain the irony that Radical design did not necessarily include those workers, designers, and activists who fought directly for social reform. For the most part, Radical designers accessed these social movements at a remove, a distance that revealed itself in the perceived “aesthetic” quality of their projects. Their utopianism, experimentalism, theories, and

2 Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), xlvii.

3 André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982); Alain Touraine, *La société post-industrielle: Naissance d'une société* (Paris: Danoël, 1969); Rudolf Bahro, *Socialism and Survival: Articles, Essays and Talks, 1979–1982*. Introduction by E. P. Thompson (London: Heretic Books, 1982).

4 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Manuel Castells, “The Service Economy and Postindustrial Society: A Sociological Critique,” *International Journal of Health Services* 6, no. 4 (1976): 33–39; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

technological sophistication accorded their work its surplus value above and beyond the design of ordinary commodities and more enduring forms of political organization.

Prominent Radical designers include Ettore Sottsass Jr., Enzo Mari, Gaetano Pesce, Ugo La Pietra Riccardo Dalisi, Nanni Strada, Clino Trini Castelli, Andrea Branzi, Dario and Lucia Bartolini and the other members of Archizoom Associati. Also involved were the related collectives Superstudio, UFO, Zziggurat, Gruppo Strum, Cavart, and Global Tools.<sup>5</sup> These individuals and groups garnered international attention toward the end of the 1960s through the mid-1970s during the unfolding of Italy's politically tumultuous 1969–70 “Hot Autumn.” During this moment, the rapid expansion of the “Economic Miracle” had begun to stagnate along with the Catholic Church's influence over civil society, so too the doctrine of progress and reconciliation put forth by the ruling Christian Democratic Party and its allies.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, workers began to organize themselves outside of traditional trade unions. They no longer identified along party lines, and likewise, attrition rates and protest movements exploded across Italian universities when students saw little hope of gainful employment.<sup>7</sup>

Radical designers styled these developments through their products, writing, and pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> They taught at polytechnical universities across the peninsula, penned columns for publications including *Stile Industria*, *Casabella*, *Modo*, and *Domus*, and consulted as product designers for firms in Florence, Milan, and Turin. As they addressed the new economic, political, and civil order, they catered to and drew inspiration from a thriving counterculture. They also spoke to a bourgeoisie that purchased their “Made in Italy” children's games, clothing, furniture, communications technologies, office equipment, and other necessities of the era.<sup>9</sup>

5 Paola Navone and Bruno Orlandoni, *Architettura radicale* (Segrate, Italy: G. Milani, 1974), 26; Gianni Pettena, *Radicals: Architettura e Design; 1960–1975* (Florence and Venice: Il Ventilabro; La Biennale di Venezia, 1996); Catharine Rossi and Alex Coles, *The Italian Avant Garde 1968–1976* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2013).

6 Sabino Acquaviva, *Religione e irreligione nell'età postindustriale* (Rome: AVE, 1971).

7 Paul Ginsborg, *History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

8 Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics after Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007); Amit Wolf, “Discorsi per Immagini: Of Political and Architectural Experimentation,” *California Italian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012): 1–20.

9 Catherine Rossi, *Crafting Design in Italy: From Post-War to Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

Debates over the meaning of post-industrialism appeared in the Italian Left in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1980s, designers such as Tomás Maldonado and Andrea Branzi advanced paradigms of *post-industrialismo* (post-industrialism), *tardo industrialism* (late industrialism), *nuovo industrialismo* (new industrialism), *deindustrializzazione* (de-industrialization), *la società post-industriale* (post-industrial society), and *la cultura informatica* (the culture of information), eventually as a way to frame their work as “postmodern.”<sup>11</sup> In the absence of a unified theory of post-industrialism throughout the early period of the movement’s efflorescence, Radical designers made sense of their circumstances materially, through their orientation to new types of artisanal and industrial processes. Some revised their own working methods, forming new collective and collaborative models of ideation and production. Others entered into commissioning and freelance arrangements with local firms like Cassina, Driade, Danese, Poltronova, and Abet Print who specialized in niche furniture, textiles, ceramics, tableware, and laminates. While some worked as graphic designers for the Italian worker’s movements as they protested factory conditions at Fiat, Montedison, and elsewhere, others consulted for national conglomerates and multinational corporations such as Montefibre and Olivetti who, like the designers, were busy reconfiguring their labour process and organizational management as they oriented toward new markets.

Focusing on a few representative projects, this study considers how designers managed the contradictions of post-industrialism, exploring its utopian premises tied to the emerging service economy. I also consider the local ramifications for skilled labour and automated manufacturing resulting from the shifts to post-industrialism. The designers’ efforts to make sense of these issues speaks to their attempt to calibrate the competing senses of “design” itself during the post-war period, namely as both a technical programme oriented to the future and a formal aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> For the sake

10 See Manfredo Tafuri’s critique of Daniel Bell in “Lavoro intellettuale e sviluppo capitalistico,” *Contropiano* 2 (1970): 262; Enzo Schiavuta, “Scienza, innovazione, ciclo: Problemi di prospettiva storica,” *Contropiano* 2 (1971): 314.

11 For discussions of post-industrialism and the Italian Left: Giuliano Urbani, *Sindacati e politica nella società post-industriale* (Milan: Il Mulino, 1976); and a retrospective overview: Cristina Corradi, *Storia dei marxismi in Italia* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2005). For invocations of post-industrialism by designers, architects, and urbanists by the 1980s: Andrea Branzi, *La casa calda: Esperienze del nuovo design italiano* (Milan: Idea, 1984); Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodern: L’architettura nella società post-industriale* (Milan: Electa, 1982); Pier Luigi Cervellati, *La città post-industriale* (Milan: Il Mulino, 1984); Tomás Maldonado, *Il futuro della modernità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1987).

12 For a broader discussion of the competing senses of design in the Italian post-war context, see Andrea Branzi in conversation with Catharine Rossi in Catharine Rossi, “Crafting Modern



of schematic clarity, the study reduces a set of recognizable technical and political orientations to particular designers including Ettore Sottsass Jr., Enzo Mari, Nanni Strada, Clino Trini Castelli, and designers affiliated with Archizoom Associati. In reality, the relationships among the designers, their projects, and publics were more amorphous, mutually informative, and fractious. A cursory sketch of their diverse efforts reveals a field of practice through which the contested aesthetics and politics of post-industrialism emerges through four distinct topoi: neo-Fordism, worker experience, flexible specialization, and preservationism. The quality of the designers' products and projects, and the reasons they used to justify and promote their activities spoke to competing class interests and economic fortunes. This makes them especially appropriate subjects for thinking structurally about the competing valences of post-industrialism in the long 1960s.

### Neo-Fordism

In the early 1960s, just before the moment of worker militancy and student unrest over imperial interventionism in Southeast Asia, Ettore Sottsass travelled through Jaipur, Agra, Rangoon, Kyoto, and Burma, publishing his travel diary in the periodical *Domus*. He wanted to alert his readers and fellow designers to the dynamic by which vernacular architecture and styles of dress were becoming obsolescent due to global mass production and neo-colonialism. Along with photographs Sottsass published from his 1963 visit to Agra, he discussed how global tourism to the Taj Mahal obfuscated the lived experiences of the people who lived in its vicinity, drawing attention away from local painted façades and construction methods in the Taj Ganji neighbourhood (fig. 13.1).<sup>13</sup> In an essay on Burma from the same year, he wrote of “splitting old bamboo with bare hands, weaving, knotting and seaming in a completely different way. All these ways of creating homes are as light as clothes.” With respect to Burmese clothing itself, he wrote,

Design in Italy, from Post-War to Postmodernism” (Dissertation, Royal College of Art, 2011), 503.

13 “So the Taj Mahal is there and everyone goes to see it [...] but nobody goes to see Agra itself and its people: nobody cares about the cows that wander in the streets, the old people smoking opium crumpled against the walls like larva, the altars of rags and leaves and incense smoke, the potters, milk sellers [...] and women who peep furtively from their doors with their youngest baby in their arms. What do these people do crushed by that monstrous celebrity, the Taj Mahal.” Ettore Sottsass, “Viaggio a Oriente. 3 puntata: Templi in India,” *Domus* 396 (November 1962): 40–45.



Figure 13.1: Ettore Sottsass Jr., Photograph of Agra, *Domus*, 1963. Archivio Domus. Copyright Editoriale Domus S.p.A.

“As I have said before a dress which can be made by hand, can be unpicked by hand and even turned inside out to look new and shortened if shorter clothes come into fashion.”<sup>14</sup>

In these passages, Sottsass romanticized the poverty and earlier handicraft stages of production he discovered on his travels. His writing increasingly drew inspiration from the American Beats including Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, whom he had befriended and whose search for Dharma informed his own principles of “magic design” (*disegno magico*).<sup>15</sup> In Sottsass’s “Yantra” ceramics for instance, rational planning was completely eliminated from the design process in favour of spontaneity, an intuitive feeling for clay and glazes, and neo-shamanic ritual.<sup>16</sup>

Daniel Bell had predicted that automation and computer technologies would spell an end to older forms of labour and their attendant “ideological” (class)

14 Ettore Sottsass, “Viaggio a Oriente. Prima puntata: Birmania,” *Domus* 392 (June 1962): 37–42.

15 Sottsass’s partner at the time, the writer Fernanda Pivano, was the translator of the Beats. They maintained friendships with Allen Ginsburg and Gregory Corso among others and popularized their writing in Italy.

16 Ettore Sottsass, “Disegno Magico,” *Stile Industria*, no. 8 (October 1956); Hans Höger and Ettore Sottsass, *Ettore Sottsass Junior, Designer, Artist, Architect* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1993), 175.

conflicts.<sup>17</sup> Over the 1960s, futurologists heralded a coming “post-scarcity” society whose equilibrium would be managed through scenario planning and decentralized environmentalism.<sup>18</sup> Sottsass seemed to illustrate these visions in his 1971 illustrations, *The Planet as a Festival* where orbs summoned the earth’s energies and redistributed them across a grid connected to nomadic tent communities. In the accompanying narrative, Sottsass imagined that due to increased automation, the earth’s subequatorial areas could become sites for endless dancing and enjoyment. Temporary architecture would provide giant fairgrounds and palaces for a society with endless free time.

Meanwhile, in his corporate work for the communications firm Olivetti, Sottsass helped design complex programmable machine tools for factory workers. The *Delphos* and *Icarus* ergonomic office environments and computer systems were suited for the rapidly growing rank and file of the Italian service sector (fig. 13.2).<sup>19</sup> There were discontinuities and parallels between the conditions of underdevelopment pictured in his travel writing, illustrations, and ceramics and his work in high-tech design. His praise for the flexibility, transience, and multi-functionality of handicrafts served as a proxy for new kinds of automation and labour processes at Olivetti. The rituals of charismatic visionaries from his travelogues doubled for the social-psychological methods, personnel management, and incentive schemes propounded by Western corporate managers who used his products.

Sottsass’s work registered a push towards “neo-Fordism”: in the wake of more stringent domestic regulations and the strengthening of unions in large factories, Italian multinational companies delocalized their labour processes by outsourcing them to smaller domestic firms and branch plants in the Global South. Over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s, Sottsass abstracted the details he found on his frequent trips to India from their contexts, using them as accents on Finish Fetish furniture. These furniture designs have since become synonymous with Italian postmodernism.<sup>20</sup>

17 Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Postindustrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

18 Herman Kahn, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley, CA: Ramparts, 1971).

19 “It is generally accepted that there is a direct relationship between the physical stimuli coming from a working environment and feeling well or unwell in the course of a day’s work [...] but well-being does not depend only on the stimuli acting on our senses. It also depends on how the human relations in offices are structured and managed.” Sottsass, quoted in Höger and Sottsass, *Ettore Sottsass Junior*, 50.

20 Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011).



Figure 13.2: Ettore Sottsass Jr. and George Sowden, Intelligent Terminal System TC 800, 1974, manufactured by Olivetti.

Meanwhile Olivetti established plants in São Paulo, Singapore, and Mexico City. Each plant incorporated nodal (multi-use) as opposed to sequential (conveyor belt) labour processes and a largely depoliticized workforce of semi-skilled and unskilled labourers able to operate just-in-time delivery systems. Sottsass's trips to South America and Southeast Asia in this moment provided an ideological foothold for adjustments to volatile markets and the offloading of labour costs. By construing craftsmanship as underdeveloped, distant, and ornamental, he sanctioned the company's colonialist use of these disparate locations in nostalgic, if not fantastical terms. His expansionist-developmental approach resolved the contradictions between high-tech and craft through the terms laid forth by the multinational corporation at a pivotal moment in which Italy moved from the semi-periphery to the core of the world system.

### Worker Experience

Sottsass was tremendously effective and prolific. He provided the elite with a sense that they, too, were participating in, and even driving the Italian counterculture. He bridged the ideologies of the counterculture

and multinationals through a Pop-Primitivism that packaged the vague Third-Worldist sympathies of the Western European bourgeoisie within furniture, interiors, and other readily digestible commodities. He devised machine tools that could change and combine functions to facilitate teamwork. He transformed offices for white-collar workers, introducing open-plan designs, interactive machines, and communications networks. To spur these developments in the character of labour, he discovered symbolic connections between the post-industrial workplace and pre-industrial handicrafts. Sottsass obscured the lived experience of workers themselves and their antagonistic position toward capital—an obfuscation that fit with Olivetti's blend of utopian socialism and corporate paternalism.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, Sottsass's colleague Enzo Mari focused on worker experience and self-organization while making the relative inefficacy of the designer in class struggle the governing theme of his research. The tension between the two approaches comes across in a 1974 review Sottsass wrote for an exhibition Mari presented at Galleria Danese in Milan. The exhibition was based on Mari's project from the previous year: *Proposal for Porcelain Handicrafts* (1973). Mari reconfigured the production line of a small porcelain factory, provoking artisans to create impromptu variations on their ceramics in order to liven up their humdrum work from one piece to the next.<sup>22</sup> Sottsass wrote, "It is a proposal for non-alienated, integrated work. A diagram for meticulous gestures of the hand, attentive gazes of the eyes that perhaps have rediscovered their destiny."<sup>23</sup> Sottsass—alongside the influential critic Giulio Carlo Argan—read Mari's restructuring of the small factory as a recovery of "species being," a free pursuit of productive activity.<sup>24</sup> They

21 As Romano Alquati points out, in the wake of Adriano Olivetti's sudden death in 1960, the company largely abandoned the utopian socialist tenets laid out by its original post-war ideologues. Romano Alquati, *Sulla FIAT e altri scritti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975). Chiara Ricciardelli, *Olivetti, una storia, un sogno, ancora da scrivere: La sociologia del lavoro Italiana nell'esperienza di Ivrea* (Milan: Angeli, 2001). Cf. Olivetti's own account of its history: Giovanni Giudice, *Design Process Olivetti: 1908–1978* (Milan: Olivetti, 1983).

22 Mari conducted his project in the workshops of La Freccia di T. e R. Tosin in Vicenza. Alessio Franson writes, "Mari recovered a technique that did not use the mold or the lathe, but simple systems of intertwining and joining ceramic elements obtained by extrusion of rods, strips, and small discs. Workers were free to alternate these elements freely, and their initial designs while co-workers could replace and elaborate the design independently." Alessio Franson, *Enzo Mari, o, Della qualità politica dell'oggetto 1953–1973* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2019), 169–71.

23 Ettore Sottsass in Enzo Mari, *Una proposta per la lavorazione a mano della porcellana* (Milan: Danese, 1974) np.

24 Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, edited by Quintin Hoare (New York: Vintage, 1974), 329.

aligned Mari's work with the popular "povera" aesthetic that persisted into the mid-1970s, which in turn, recalled earlier anarchic-modernist associations of post-industrialism and guild handicraft.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Mari's partner, the critic Lea Vergine, argued that his recent work and collaborations were less utopian longings for earlier forms of collective labour than attempts, alongside militant artists and activists, to transform the contemporary workplace by orienting workers to the quality of labour and relations of production.<sup>26</sup>

Where Mari geared his *Proposal* to working conditions, his *Autoprogettazione* (self-design) (1974) demystified ("deconditioned") productive processes for consumers by placing his tools and materials in their hands.<sup>27</sup> He packaged mail-order kits that yielded simple wooden tables, chairs, beds, and cabinets out of rough boards and nails. He explained, "I tried to reduce technical difficulties to a minimum [...] these boards are prefabricated in different sections which could be shortened to the length required."<sup>28</sup> The construction process avoided monotonous repetition, the abstract calculation of measurements, and formal ratios. Rather, Mari argued, when "making the furniture, users become aware of the structural reasoning behind it, which subsequently improves their ability to assess commodities on the market with a more critical eye." Imagining variations in size, solidity, and fit cultivated immanent expertise. Mari's tables had a pedagogical function, drawing their

25 Argan describes Mari's work as "anti-industrialist," "pre-artisanal and -linguistic," dealing with the "primary stages of pottery, with its organic gestural expressiveness, of mixing and interlacing, and to the piece of furniture with rudimentary constructions and modular planks assembled and nailed together." Giulio Carlo Argan, "Enzo Mari: A Critical and Artistic Evaluation," *L'Espresso*, May 5, 1974; Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art Politics and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

26 Commenting on Mari's April 1973 exhibition: *Hammer and Sickle: Three of the Ways an Artist can Contribute to Class Struggle*, Vergine connects Mari's attempts to engage the worker's movement in Milan with projects by Manfredo Massironi, Piero Gilardi, and Mari's collaborator Giovanni Rubino, whose work *Mortedison* (1973) is placed alongside Mari's. *Mortedison* was conducted with workers at Porto Marghera who were protesting unsafe working conditions at the Montedison chemical plant. Lea Vergine, "Le Malaise, l'alternative, et l'opposition," *Opus International* 53 (November–December 1974): 22.

27 Enzo Mari, *Autoprogettazione?*, 2nd ed. (Mantua: Corraini, 2002), 46. For an overview of the idea of "deconditioning" in Sottsass and Mari: Lindsay A. Caplan, "Open Works: Between the Programmed and the Free, Art in Italy 1962 to 1972" (PhD Dissertation, CUNY Graduate Center, 2017), 32–64.

28 Enzo Mari, "A Critical-Ideological Debate between E. Mari and E. Facchinelli," *L'erba voglio*, no.16, reprinted in Mari, *Autoprogettazione* (Mantua: Corraini, 1974), 41.

user-makers into “critical reflection on design,” and by extension, their own material conditions.

Though this table functions properly, all the details announce their functions, this leg is a leg, this latticework underneath is a strengthening beam, the small strut under the boards of the tabletop are there to stop it vibrating. The nail serves to link the boards together. Having reduced the technique down to its reasons, to its simplest moments, this is what makes the object autonomous.<sup>29</sup>

By promoting practice with basic materials and technologies, Mari hoped to preserve the “firsthand experience” and “ability” that “carpenters and other manual workers already have.”<sup>30</sup> This sort of embodied knowledge might resist the Left intelligentsia’s tendency towards turning material working conditions into abstract ideas. Mari asked,

How is it possible to accomplish the deconditioning of form as a value rather than strictly corresponding to content? The only way I know how, the way that belongs to my field of experience, is when critical thought is based on practical work, when the tools are lacking, then technical know-how and technical culture would take a fairly long time to acquire.<sup>31</sup>

Focusing on hands-on practice with tools, Mari positioned himself in opposition to “the public, young students, militant workers, political managers of the groups of the New Left, to that part of the public that clearly develops research and criticism, albeit limited to basic structural relationships.”<sup>32</sup> *Autoprogettazione* gestured toward the initiatives of “worker inquiry” and “co-research” (*conricerca*) where militant intellectuals learned from workers, drawing on knowledge accrued on the factory floor.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, his

29 Mari, “Critical-Ideological Debate,” 43.

30 Enzo Mari, “Comment by Enzo Mari on the ‘Proposta per un’autoprogettazione’ Transcribed by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle in the Book ‘Enzo Mari’ (Parma: CSAC, 1983),” reprinted in Mari, *Autoprogettazione*, 49.

31 Mari, *Autoprogettazione*, 51.

32 Mari, *Autoprogettazione*, 51.

33 Mari, *Autoprogettazione*, 48; for further discussion of “conricerca” in *Operaismo*: Jacopo Galimberti, “Co-research and Art: Danilo Montaldi’s Horizontal Production of Knowledge,” in *Postwar Italian Art History Today*, ed. Sharon Hecker and Marin Sullivan (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 189–206.

attempt to “decondition” consumers through design lessons took part in a tendency associated with the extra-parliamentary Left, which tried to strip cultural activities of their commodified frameworks of consumption and distribution.<sup>34</sup> Both *Proposal for Porcelain Handicrafts* and *Autoprogettazione* compensated for the loss of traditional skill ladders within processes of mass production, the standardization of labour, and the widening division between artisanal and industrial work. The works also engaged the theoretical debates about the refusal and autonomy of labour in the “Workerist” movement against the concrete demands for better pay and benefits within the Italian Communist Party.<sup>35</sup>

Mari’s projects, therefore, raised the issue of worker centrality. One major point of reckoning across the Italian Left by the 1970s was whether traditional workers still embodied the interests of the working class. Workers were split into what Alberto Asor Rosa called the “two societies.” On one side, a declining rank of salaried workers who fell under the strong protections of the 1970 worker statutes; on the other, the increasing numbers of diffuse, precarious, under- and flexibly employed and exploited who did not. These factions had trouble coming together over a common class ideology or social identity whose interests could be achieved through collective bargaining. As a result, by 1975, amid austerity, inflation, and mass unemployment, together with the dissolution of extra-parliamentary groups, the Italian Left found itself in disarray. As the political theorist Antonio Negri put it, the labour modifications “imposed and provoked” by the struggles of the Hot Autumn had caused a drastic “restructuring,” both at the level of the automation of factory equipment and the social democracy and terrorism that came to inflect the political process.<sup>36</sup>

Over the course of the 1970s, the diffuse, creative, and clandestine occupational and social connections that formed the backbone of the movement, which became known as *Autonomia* provided a new social imaginary and model of radical subjectivity. As Workerism turned into “anti-foundational subjectivism,” the movement focused on the needs of

34 Sergio Bianchi and Lanfranco Caminiti, *Gli autonomi: Le storie, le lotte, le teorie*, vol. 3 (Rome: DerriveApprodi, 2008).

35 When Mari exhibited his *Falce e Martello (Hammer and Sickle)* project in 1973 at the Galleria Milano, he screened the film *Comitati politici: Testimonianze sulle lotte operaie in Italia nella primavera del '71*, which presented accounts of trade unionists, clerical workers, and shop-floor employees from major Italian firms. Enzo Mari, *Falce e martello / The Hammer and Sickle* (1973), repr. ed., ed. Nicola Pellegrini (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2020).

36 Antonio Negri, *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (London: Verso, 2005 [1976]), 126.



individuals, the under- and unemployed, and their capacity for collective action in countermanding the incursions of multinational capital through social labour. This was in distinction to a fully fledged political or economic analysis of class structure.<sup>37</sup> Radical designers oriented to these voluntarist social movements, which were more preoccupied with the agency of new subjectivities by taking up a critical stance towards consumerism and the designer's compromised position in the service of luxury goods' markets.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Mari's projects on the quality of work, the preservation of skill, immanent senses of use value, and the demystification of commodity fetishism proved to be a provisional model for healing rifts across the splintering Left, hypostasized in the body and technique of the idealized worker.

### Flexible Specialization

Steve Wright, an authority on Italian Workerism, argues that Mari's circle of Northern intellectuals who participated in theoretical reflections on Italian Communism, "idealised proletarian subjectivity as invariably revolutionary." Their idealism, Wright contends, left them doubly blind, both to labour's rapid entrance into the service industries and "the Italian proletariat's retreat into its own stultifying institutions."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, their focus on subjectivity obscured another important emerging post-industrial topos: the rise of the so-called Third Italy. This was a less-regulated economy of small and medium-sized businesses, artisans, flexible machinery, and municipal funding found in the central and north-east of the country and north of Milan.<sup>40</sup>

By the early 1970s, while students, factory workers, corporations, and government agencies operated under austerity and stagnation, small, semi-provincial artisanal firms experienced a boom. They began to adopt "flexible specialization" and "vertical disintegration" into their production lines, establishing non-competitive districts, which were often parasitic on

37 Perry Anderson, *The New Old World* (London: Verso, 2009), 345.

38 In 1972, just before the Porcelain Factory project and *Autoprogettazione*, Mari tried to discard all of his early *arte programmata* work for his exhibition *Svendita* at the Galleria Milano.

39 Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto, 2002), 63.

40 For a detailed discussion of the political economy of flexible specialization, its connection to Soviet productivism, and attempts to export the labour model to the Soviet Union, see Jacob Stewart-Halevy, "The Design of Flexible Specialisation," *Contemporary European History*, January 13, 2023, 1–23.

long-standing Catholic and Communist communities.<sup>41</sup> By the mid-1970s, craftsmen who chafed at the foremen's (*Delegati*) dismantling of skill ladders and wage hierarchies in large factories escaped to "runaway" shops in the districts. Because these shops employed less than twenty workers, they were not subject to the regulations of the 1970s worker statutes. By 1977, Arnaldo Bagnasco coined the term *La Terza Italia* (The Third Italy) to describe the district-level forms of kinship and municipal welfare that marked the new labour configuration.

Mari kept abreast of Workerist orientations towards the conditions of mass production and the "social factory." However, he also designed products for a variety of small enterprises including Triade, Simon International, and Danese, who were renovating their own sub-supply chains and making use of outsourced labour to produce luxury furniture and other domestic goods. Mari's consultations for firms on the urban periphery and his renovation of the porcelain production line gestured to the perpetual innovation of the small districts. They engaged artisans who, as he aptly put it, "adapt their own work to the exigencies of the market, retaining for that same work a special dignity in a way beyond price."<sup>42</sup> Mari's projects took part in what we might call a "productivist" push by radical designers to re-engineer the very processes of artisanal and industrial work. They did this through interventions into the means and relations of production in typical Third Italy industries, which included ceramics, furniture textiles, and clothing.<sup>43</sup>

"Dressing design," or the design of new forms of sheltering the body, proved especially fertile—if somewhat anomalous—terrain for the Radical design movement. In her 1973 project *Il Manto e la Pelle* (The Cloak and the Skin), Nanni Strada's tubular knitwear exploited automated technology and fabric welding methods to assemble seams without linings. Strada phased out the stages of traditional clothing manufacture including taking orders from wholesalers and retailers, working with limited production facilities, and offloading assembly and finishing operations to knitwear subcontractors.<sup>44</sup> The tailor's work of fitting the clothing to an individual body was displaced onto the wearer, who could adjust the fabric through ties and pleats. The simple paper bags that held the clothing had the look of "*grafica povera*,"

41 Arnaldo Bagnasco and Carlo Trigilia, eds., *Società e politica nelle aree di piccola impresa: Il caso della Valdelsa* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1985).

42 Enzo Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano* (Florence: Electa, 1981), 7.

43 Marco Bettiol and Stefano Micelli, eds., *Design e creatività nel made in Italy: Proposte per i distretti industriali* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005).

44 Camilla Cederna, "Il lato debole: A cura di Camilla," *L'Espresso*, no. 14 (April 4, 1976): 90.

resembling those found at the grocery store or butcher shop.<sup>45</sup> As the critic Tomasso Trini wrote, this kind of clothing “involved the handler and user” who became both aware of the new methods of manufacture and her role in altering its design.

While Strada renovated textile equipment and created adjustable and elastic clothing, Andrea Branzi, Dario and Lucia Bartolini, and others from the Florentine-based collective Archizoom Associati issued a related critique of mass production in the garment industry. In 1973, they released a line of clothing entitled *Moda Mare-Capri* where an elastic body sheath underlay a loose overall. Although this costume was derivative of *Il Manto e la Pelle* in its attempt to free clothing from bodily form, the Archizoom designers engaged flexibly specialized methods of production while addressing the emerging discussions on the Left around the social factory and post-industrial society. Branzi wrote,

We saw fashion as a creative field, but at the same time as a theoretical model for a new kind of production, given the name post-industrial by theoreticians in that the all-embracing logic of mass production, which represses changes in taste as an unpredictable and irrational variable, was giving way to a search for flexibility. It was no longer society that must resemble the factory, in every way, but the factory that had to adapt to society.<sup>46</sup>

Archizoom’s attempt to integrate moments of conception and execution spoke to how small firms were able to innovate and maintain a sense of autonomy by specializing in non-standard goods, relying on traditional multi-purpose technologies and craft skills, adapting to the shifting consumer taste preferences and short runs that precluded mass production. By contrast, in large clothing factories, the huge machines “behaved like a giant tailor’s shop, reproducing hand-crafted products on an industrial scale.”<sup>47</sup> “Anthropomorphism, waste, and regression to the artisan level, this is what happens when the logic of production and consumption come into conflict,” Branzi chided.<sup>48</sup>

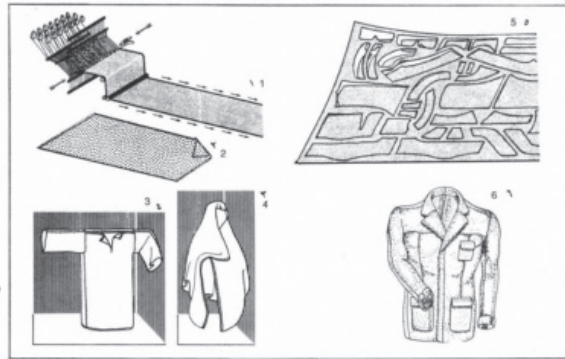
45 Francesca Grazzini, “Moda: L’oriente in scatola,” *Vita Moderna* 40 (Milan: Nanni Strada, nd).

46 Andrea Branzi, *The Hot House: Italian New Wave Design*, trans. C. H. Evans (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), 87.

47 Branzi, *Hot House*, 87.

48 Branzi, *Hot House*, 87.

**VESTIRSI ARABO  
S'HABILLER ARABE**  
concorso per il costume nazionale libico  
a competition for the libyan national costume



LUCIA BARTOLINI, DARIO BARTOLINI, ARCHIZOOM ASSOCIATI; CONSULENZA STORICO-ANTROPOLOGICA, GIUSEPPINA CAPUTO

«Affrontare lo studio della realizzazione del costume nazionale arabo significa amalizzarne i presupposti politici e culturali piuttosto che ricercare elementi della tradizione da ricomporre in un costume forse nuovo ma certo non rispondente alla realtà evolutiva della nazione araba. E' chiaro che le costanti ideologie su cui si basa l'attuale evoluzione del mondo arabo possono realizzarsi anche in un oggetto, che rappresenta ancora il più diretto strumento di comunicazione umana: l'abito. La realtà economica del mondo arabo ora in rapida evoluzione pone nuovi problemi di organizzazione della produzione e del lavoro, anche nel settore abbigliamento. Quando parliamo di procedimenti produttivi intendiamo proporre delle strutture alternative o comunque più elastiche rispetto alle gigantesche strutture industriali del capitalismo occidentale. Metodi produttivi disponibili per un tipo di programmazione in grado di sfruttare vantaggiosamente la logica della produzione in serie. Il costume arabo dovrà possedere le

Il mondo arabo in evoluzione cerca una propria immagine. Di questa ricerca di identità è un esempio il concorso di recente bandito dalla Repubblica Araba di Libia per il confezionamento del «costume nazionale arabo islamico». Il costume, l'abito, può essere strumento di comunicazione diretta, espressione di una realtà culturale. Il concorso — concorso internazionale cui han partecipato italiani, turchi, tunisini, egiziani... — si è chiuso il 23 maggio 1974. Presentiamo due progetti italiani.

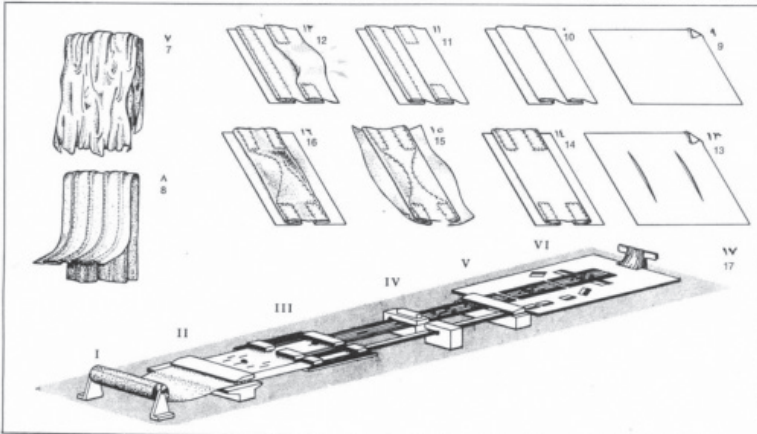


Figure 13.3: Dress Arabic, A Competition for the Libyan National Costume published in *Domus* showing designs for clothing production by Dario Bartolini and Lucia Bartolini. 1974. Archivio Domus. Copyright Editoriale Domus S.p.A.

By 1975, as the Italian Left expressed solidarity with Maoism and pan-Arab socialism, Radical designers sought out modes of manufacture and new avenues for export that partially aligned with these revolutions abroad. Prodded by Branzi, Castelli, Strada and the Bartolinis entered a competition

issued by prime minister of Libya Abdessalam Jalloud to design a line of official costumes in accord with Islamic Moral Law and Libya's pan-Arab vision (fig. 13.3). The Italians argued that restraints at the level of both production and code of dress offered them a way of specifying their ideological departure from the gigantic firms of the West in favour of what they imagined were the alternative, "elastic" structures of production in the Arab world.<sup>49</sup> They avoided waste or finishing processes in favour of adjustable lacing and lengths determined by the user. This produced striking results from simple technological means they imagined would be available to the Libyan manufacturers.<sup>50</sup> Mari's placing the tools of production in the hands of the consumer and Strada and the Bartolini's emphasis on adjustments to machine tools and the exigencies of the wearer reveal Radical design projects as open works accommodating the flexible means of their production and the spontaneous needs of their users.

Although the designers did not win the Libyan competition, within a matter of years, Dario Bartolini developed ways of assembling based on traditional clothing from the Middle East and South and East Asia. Strada began to package and sell related outfits, alongside those inspired by traditional Chinese dress, at *Oriente e Cina*, a firm with stores in Milan and Paris. By the 1980s, she made trips to China and India, finding buyers to import local bamboo furniture, lacquer goods, and porcelain. Eventually she released her own line of leisurewear for the Soviet market with the sewing machine company, Rimoldi. Soon after, she opened stores under her own label in Oporto and Lisbon.

The designers' overtures to global markets reflect broader developments across Third Italy manufacturing that deteriorated the labour conditions of industrial districts and the quality of their output. Economic historians have pointed to how the historic textile-apparel districts of the city of Prato, the paradigm of Third Italy innovation, maintained their global dominance up until the turn of the millennium despite competition from Eastern Europe.<sup>51</sup> They did this through a variety of exploits: speeding

49 According to Castelli, Libyan "methods of production are more elastic than the gigantic industrial establishments in the capitalist West." Clino Trini Castelli, "Le duemila e una note," *Casabella*, nos. 392–93 (1974): 66–67.

50 Ampelio Bucci, Dario Bartolini, and Laura Bonin, *L'altro modo di fare l'abito: Elementi strutturali di taglio nell'abbigliamento non occidentale*. Quaderno 1 (Milan: Centro Design Montefibre, 1975).

51 Costis Hadjimichalis, "The End of Third Italy as We Knew It?," *Antipode* 38, no. 1 (2006): 82–106; Calvin Chen, "Made in Italy (by the Chinese): Migration and the Rebirth of Textiles and Apparel," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2015): 111–26.

up production, razor thin margins, collaboration and batch production, flexibility marked by gender inequities, sweatshop immigrant labour, homeworkers, family work, dangerous conditions, unpaid overtime, and the avoidance of business taxes. Concurrently, big capital skirted union restrictions by offloading phases of their production onto smaller firms who could change the rules around entering and exiting the labour market and cut costs at a moment's notice.<sup>52</sup> As large and small firms became increasingly enmeshed, flexibility lost its utopianism and led to unconstrained employer control.<sup>53</sup>

Although Branzi and Strada's limited reliance on fabricators was not at all exploitative, by the 1980s, high-end designers, advertisers, and luxury service providers were increasingly able to draw on small industrial districts as they looked to establish their brands in the new markets of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Asia. These outlets eventually led to new consumers and the outsourcing of Made-in-Italy processes to new workers within industrial districts in Italy and abroad, specifically, in China, Vietnam, Romania, and Turkey.

In its orientation to foreign markets, the productivist phase of early 1970s Radical design augured Italy's turn to global export through just-in-time production, fast fashion, and brand management from the 1980s onwards. Under these conditions, the temporal divide implicit in the term post-industrialism would be mapped onto spatial divisions of labour. Accordingly, service sector zones involved in the conception, publicity, and retail of design products became geographically cordoned off from industrial zones of domestic exploitation and foreign expropriation.

## Preservationism

It did not take designers long to catch on to these developments in the restructuring of artisanal and industrial labour. Consequently, they explored the ramifications of outsourcing and flexible specialization for local economies. As the art historian Martina Tanga has discussed, already in 1973, when Enrico Crispolti staged the ambient art event, Volterra '73, artists and designers used the opportunity to trace how the small Tuscan

52 Carlo Trigilia, "Work and Politics in the Third Italy's Industrial Districts," in *Industrial Districts and Interfirm Cooperation in Italy*, ed. Frank Pyke, Giacomo Becattini, and Werner Sengenberger (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1990), 160–84.

53 Marino Regini, ed., *La sfida della flessibilità* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988).

town experienced rapid population loss and an attendant decline in its centuries-old alabaster industry.<sup>54</sup> They framed their inquiries around the deskilling of traditional handicrafts, while relying on marketing to “preserve” and “revitalize” earlier forms of manual labour in the modern economy. Meanwhile, between 1973 and 1975, scores of Radical designers formed the group Global Tools and conducted utopian laboratories on new, historical, peasant, and indigenous crafts. Announcing the programme in *Casabella*, Branzi wrote,

The manual work and handicraft in “minimal” techniques promoted by Global Tools are by no means to be understood as alternatives to industrial production [...] but rather as ways of redefining the field of production itself, which would no longer reproduce all of the objects and functions around us, but serve a limited area dedicated to individual, creative and spontaneous communication.<sup>55</sup>

Through their collaborative work with Global Tools, Mari, Sottsass, and Branzi and their colleagues hoped that their research would preserve and restore creativity in one’s work based on the “use and activity of the body” and the recovery of obsolescent pre-modern rituals.<sup>56</sup>

Between 1976 and 1979, as the moment of Radical design waned, Mari embarked on a multi-year research project on the fate of Italian handicrafts as part of his presidency of the Associazione per il Disegno Industriale (ADI), the central organization for the promotion of design in Italy. As Jacopo Galimberti has described, just prior to Mari’s presidency, the designer Ennio Chiggio attempted to unionize the association, prompting its members to see themselves not as prestigious individual creators, but workers whose labour was collectively exploited by the companies for whom they freelanced.<sup>57</sup> Mari’s research may be seen as a retreat from the attempt to organize intellectual labourers, finding instead alliances between

54 Martina Tanga, “Extramural Exhibitions: New Urban Spaces in 1970s Italy,” in *Spaces of (Dis) Location*, ed. Rachael Hamilton, Allison Macleod, and Jenny Munro (Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 151–70.

55 Andrea Branzi in conversation with Lapo Binazzi, Germano Celant, Adolfo Natalini, Raggi, Sottsass, and Alessandro Mendini, *Global Tools* (Milan: Laboratori didattici per la creatività individuale, 1973), np.

56 Riccardo Dalisi, Alessandro Mendini, Davide Mosconi, Franco Raggi, and Gaetano Pesce, “Corpo,” in *Global Tools* (Milan: Edizioni l’uomo e l’arte, 1975), np.

57 Jacopo Galimberti, *Images of Class: Operaismo, Autonomia and the Visual Arts (1962–1988)* (London: Verso, 2022), 246–47, 317–18.



Figure 13.4: Enzo Mari, *Where Is the Artisan?*, Milan Triennial, 1981–82.

the designer and the artisan. His project culminated in the exhibition *Dov'è l'artigiano* (*Where Is the Artisan?*) in Florence in 1981.<sup>58</sup> Presenting the shifting terrain of artisanal production in Italy as it moved between local handicraft traditions, domestic piecework, speculative design, and machine tools, Mari configured the exhibit in a wide circle at the Fortezza Da Basso. Sections were divided into various categories. Phases of work: prototypes, tools, moulds, workshops, construction sites; “research” either by designers, artists, or artisans; the cost or quantity of output (*per poco, per pochi* for instance); and temporal frameworks. These included residual cultures of traditionalism and touristic revivalism alongside emergent artisanal projects involving medical equipment and techniques of representation

<sup>58</sup> Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano*.



(fig. 13.4). *Dov'è l'artigiano* was circumspect in its exhibition design and approach. It marked the end of an activist phase for the Radical designers who hoped to intervene directly in the relations of capitalist production and the beginning of a reflexive phase. This latter phase would be characterized by research on the circulation of artisanal commodities and the limits of the designer's own agency.

As part of his survey, Mari argued that goods with limited applications including programmable machine tools, medical devices, and specialty electronics, whose production required multiple forms of expertise and equipment, continued to thrive because vertically integrated industries could not produce them economically. Although some of the industrial districts that offered these skills and fabrication technologies proved incredibly successful, Mari claimed they constituted an exception to the general trends in artisanal production. New labour divisions were threatening the quality of work and inter-firm collaboration was not a positive development in its own right. He noted that in the production of table legs, one workshop was making rubber grips while another was producing an electric pantograph etching, a form of automated engraving. A third was using these components to produce "artisanal" (kitsch vernacular) furniture. In other cases, former artisans served as perfunctory inspectors in rapidly automating industries. They became mere textile workers examining threads, "verify[ing] them on the basis of their own practical experience through complex interrelated models."<sup>59</sup> Here, Mari, disdainfully noted how artisanal production competed with and complemented industrial methods by dumbing down the quality of work, resorting to assembly line processes or suppressing the wage, while relegating skilled workers to "conditions of underdevelopment."<sup>60</sup>

Concluding *Dov'è l'artigiano*, Mari discovered rare instances in which workers managed to "freely design" their own equipment. He noted that, even in cases where the "tools, materials, forms and styles," and "planning" were traditional, they accomplished an important "ritual" function. Faced with increasingly exploitative working conditions and automation, he argued that the accomplishment of artisanal projects serve in our "collective memory" as a "reminder of a revolution that has yet to come."<sup>61</sup> Granting the designer a speculative ("ritual") function, he posited a dialectic whereby artisanal production is determined by and intervenes in its historical material conditions.

59 Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano*, 20.

60 Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano*, 16.

61 Mari, *Dov'è l'artigiano*, 16.

## Conclusion

Radical design was deeply implicated in the restructuring of labour processes during the long 1960s. Embedded and reflexive, automated and artisanal, municipal and multinational, neo-colonial and de-colonial, carnivalesque and technocratic, the movement's divergent orientations to labour transformations of the era make it a rich site for considering post-industrialism's contradictions. Indeed, in order for their work to circulate as "Radical" ideology, each of the four orientations here discussed would need to be recognized as effecting or resulting from the positions of its neighbours. Namely, they could only be understood through contrast, prolepsis, replication, and other forms of representation that linked their token projects and texts to the others within and beyond the design field.

One unresolved question, therefore, involves the niche of Radical design in the broader ecology of artisanal, industrial, cultural, and corporate labour. Radical designers constituted a group of collaborative and competitive figures, firms, and even extended families that engaged in practices that came to define flexible specialization. They, too, worked in electronics, textiles, ceramics, and furniture. They, too, resorted to non-competitive hiring, commissions, and batch production in an effort to gain a foothold in national and global markets. Their collective effort to fabricate goods, enter competitions, exhibit at trade fairs, and publicize might constitute a diffuse and reflexive production that was always already practised in the Third Italy. Their reliance on small-scale artisans in the industrial districts to fabricate their works meant that their activities constituted one node within more complex networks of production elaborated across scales, classes, and divisions of labour.

Nevertheless, with the exception of Mari's ethnographic research, Radical designers suppressed associations with flexible specialization in the self-reflexive accounts they offered of their projects and intentions, which conformed closely to the terms of "radicalism" at the time.<sup>62</sup> This frame has largely been upheld in historical scholarship since, which is centrally

62 In 1973, in the wake of the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at MoMA in 1972, Manfredo Tafuri argued "Through industrial design and the creation of 'micro-environments' the explosive contradictions of the metropolitan structures, sublimated and subjected to a cathartic irony, enter into private life. The very clever 'games' of Archizoom or the creations of sterilised anguish of Gaetano Pesce propose (despite any verbal declaration to the contrary) a 'self-liberation' through the private use of the imagination." Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (1973), trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976). For Branzi's own critical assessment of this period and his involvement in

preoccupied with long-1960s revolutions centred on gender, sexual orientation, youth, education, technology, decolonization, class and their multiple intersections. According to the radicalism paradigm, designers and their interpreters displace economic processes of deregulation and flexibility under the rubric of autonomy and liberation, recouping them for bourgeois consumers, or relatedly, for the “creativity” of individual designers.

This obfuscation may stem originally from the demands of distinction that justified the considerably higher prices and rates designers commanded *vis-à-vis* ordinary artisans, leading to their global appeal during the 1980s at the height of Italian postmodernism. Since then, the increasing split between skill and intellectual expertise has spurred a secondary division of labour in Made-in-Italy firms between brand management and technical know-how. As designers come to occupy management positions akin to creative directors, they find themselves increasingly divorced from the means of production.

Reticence about economic transformations and labour reforms in the designers’ production chains may also stem from the New Left’s difficulty in adopting contemporary artisans under a progressive umbrella, preferring instead to relegate artisanal labour to a psychological or nostalgic elsewhere: either in whimsical do-it-yourself (*fai-da-te*) amateurism or pre-modern hippy communalism.<sup>63</sup> With few exceptions, Leftists have rightly viewed the sector’s shirking of taxes, anti-unionism, the abandonment of the factory and its struggles as explicitly anti-worker.<sup>64</sup> Neither part of multinational capital nor the labour movement, and operating at the local municipal level, artisans who inhabited Italy’s industrial districts did not articulate a set of political demands that could be read as such until the 1980s when they achieved unprecedented success in the global marketplace. Only then did “Third Way” proponents across Europe hold up flexible specialization as a post-industrial model that could eliminate inefficiencies in the multinationals while further dismantling the worker’s movement.<sup>65</sup>

it: Andrea Branzi, *Una generazione esagerata, Dai radicali Italiani alla crisi della globalizzazione* (Milan: Baldini and Castoldi, 2014).

63 Gillo Dorfles, “I Pericoli del do-it-yourself,” *Progettare Inpiù: Per un comportamento creativo nei processi di rappresentazione dell’ambiente. Documenti e ricerche 2*, no. 8. (1975): 36–37; Franco Berardi, *Scrittura e Movimento* (Padua: Marsilio, 1974).

64 Giorgio Amendola, “Conclusioni,” in *La piccola e media industria nella crisi dell’economia italiana*, ed. Istituto Gramsci (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1974).

65 Giacomo Beccatini, “The Marshallian Industrial District as a Socio-Economic Notion,” in Pyke et al., *Industrial Districts and Interfirm Cooperation in Italy*, 37–51.

As the case of Sottsass makes clear, Radical designers were likewise susceptible to post-industrial techno-utopianism—the decadent period style and myopic futurological discourse for which Manfredo Tafuri criticized them in the early 1970s.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, however, they were compelled to realize these futures through their engagement with emergent and residual relations of production, corresponding with subcontractors, commissioning firms, and consumers. These conditions produced a dialectic between plan (*progetto*) and form (*disegno*). Political ideas about the metamorphosis of work were constrained and extended by what was actually possible to say and make in the context of their day-to-day activities. When aesthetic, political, and economic opportunities became entwined, post-industrial design came to participate in the design of post-industrialism.

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66 Manfredo Tafuri, "Design and Technological Utopia," in *Italy the New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, ed. Emilio Ambasz (New York: MoMA and New York Graphic Society, 1972), 395–99.

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### About the Author

**Jacob Stewart-Halevy** is Associate Professor in History of Art and Architecture at Tufts University. His publications include the book *Slant Steps: On the Art World's Semi-Periphery* (2020), contributions to edited volumes, and articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *October*, *Journal of Art Historiography*, and *Contemporary European History*.



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