'Harun Farocki: Consider Labour’

Angeliki Roussou

‘Harun Farocki: Consider Labour’, Cooper Gallery, University of Dundee, Scotland, 3 February – 1 April 2023

‘Harun Farocki: Consider Labour’ at Cooper Gallery, University of Dundee, was the first major exhibition in Scotland of significant works by the pioneering filmmaker Harun Farocki (1944–2014). It was curated by Cooper Gallery in collaboration with the curator, artist and Farocki’s collaborator (and wife), Antje Ehmann. Despite Farocki’s multifaceted and classic oeuvre on consumerism, media, technology and war, produced from the 1960s until his sudden death in 2014, the exhibition took a clear focus on his post-1985 non-narrative work, including some of his stellar experimentations with the video essay form. This acute, consistent, and vigorous, curatorial angle captioned perfectly Farocki’s filmic treatises on labour and its conditioning of lives in global capitalism.

What prompted Sophia Yadong Hao (the Director and Principal Curator at Cooper Gallery) to approach Ehmann with a proposal focused on labour was the gallery’s wider research into Dundee’s working-class histories and creative radicalism with the artist Ruth Ewan for the first chapter of ‘The Ignorant Art School’ in 2021, an ongoing, major five-chapter exhibition and event project on socially transformative art education. Dundee constitutes a particularly pertinent site for a labour-focused exhibition due to its long-standing and proud working-class culture and political activism, including the hecklers in the jute mills of the nineteenth century, the Marxist reading group on the picket line of the 1993 Timex strike and the recent Better than Zero campaign against poverty pay. Dundee is now the first city in the UK to ever host a workshop for Labour in a Single Shot (2011–ongoing), the long-term project initiated by Farocki and Ehmann, which has involved participant-based filmmaking workshops in more than twenty-one cities worldwide.

A stirring exchange between Ehmann and Hao led to the selection of the three essay films that accompanied the Labour in a Single Shot video installation in Dundee: Workers Leaving the Factory (1995), Georg K’Glaser – Writer and Smith (1988) and In Comparison (2009). The curatorial thread through which visitors encountered the installed films in the gallery was of particular interest, as it facilitated visual and political insights and overviews on the often inaccessible theme of labour.
Farocki’s iconic filmic essay *Workers Leaving the Factory* was the first work visitors could see straight ahead of them as they entered through the gallery’s main entrance. According to Hao, the placing of the projection consciously sought to evoke crowd flows to parallel the work’s stitching of archival material depicting workers finishing their working day at the factory and swarming out.1 The film centrally employs a 45-second sequence showing workers leaving a factory building – a sequence taken from the first cinema film ever shown in public, made as early as 1895 and directed and produced by Louis Lumière. Including excerpts from other films as well, such as Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, Farocki sought to test the theme of industrial labour against histories of moving image. He looked for archival examples in ‘documentaries, industrial and propaganda films, newsreels, and features’, while television or advertising film archives did not make the cut; the former gave too many results and the latter hardly any.2 Even though, for Farocki, workers leaving the factory did not (yet) constitute a cinematic or literary theme with a distinct history of representation, his devotion to the montage process as a form of historical tracing is compelling:

The film montage had a totalising effect on me. With the montage before me, I found myself gaining the impression that for over a century cinematography had been dealing with just one single theme. It’s like a child repeating the first words it has learned to speak for more than a hundred years in order to immortalise the joy of learning to speak.3

Farocki’s study of industrial labour could be situated in a broader re/turn to the documentary form observable in the 1990s, which for many critics signalled the advent of globalisation after postmodernism. Lens-based approaches challenged the fixation on immateriality or semiotics, and visually documented that the material labour of industrialism is not extinct but outsourced, and entangled in new ways with post-industrial economies. Further complicating this account, Farocki’s cross-periodic, essayistic exploration in *Workers Leaving the Factory* postulates that the archetypal filmic quest for the visuality of human movement substitutes the ‘absent and invisible movement of goods, money, [and] ideas’.4 In other words, Farocki’s work seeks to unsettle obfuscations in depicting factory work throughout cinema’s history, rather than only in specific periods, thus affirming the work’s encyclopaedic impulse alongside its ceaseless undoing. The display of *Workers Leaving the Factory* today accentuates renewed urgencies around labour. An obvious one is the recent re-emergence of work (or the action of going on strike) as the primary site tasked to absorb the impact of pandemics, climate change, energy depletion, inflation and war. Another elicits questions around the possibility of workers swarming out of the art gallery, or around art-institutional automation. Perhaps above all, Farocki’s essayistic style speaks consistently

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1 Sophia Yadong Hao, personal communication, 2023
3 Ibid, p 242
4 Ibid, p 243
to the undying labour of handling and narrativising the moving image beyond its obviousness. As Hao suggests, his work evades categorisation and prompts us ‘to question what we see’; it thus ushers in a ‘critical necessity’, making it even more relevant today ‘as a manifesto of the position an artist must take in questioning reality’.  

In Comparison was projected on the high wall of the stairwell and could be viewed panoramically from the top of the stairs. In a sense, this interim space upheld the work’s theme: brick-making and building construction processes in different sites in India, Burkina Faso, Germany, France, Switzerland and Austria. In this filmic essay, labour is captured with such virtuosity that even the most arduous, mundane, repetitive or mechanical movement becomes meditatively satisfying and cinematically rich. As stories of working with matter or machinery unfold serially, embodied human interactions and affective sociality appear subtly in comparison. Farocki depicts with economy each trajectory of production, without idealising or grand statements. All working processes, from the handmade or human-energy-dependent to the highly automated, are carefully portrayed in their inventiveness, resourcefulness and creative quirks. What unites the different brickwork styles is that in one way or another, they all seem to work. Each construction story is flagged up by twenty inter-titles, portraying graphically each newly introduced brick, including explanatory detail, usually on the temporality of the production process. Farocki’s skill in arranging labour vignettes allows for the uniqueness of each making style to be fully appreciated. Using the brick as a metaphor for infrastructure, In Comparison visualises how diverse forms of labour constitute the historically and technologically specific grounding for diverse forms of social life. However, Farocki’s comparison does not create clean-cut categorisations. For instance, a mobile

5 Sophia Yadong Hao, personal communication, 2023
phone in the vicinity of a building construction relying mainly on manual labour complicates technological assumptions around production and consumption in local economies. Despite shots of children at construction sites in India or women carrying babies together with construction materials in Burkina Faso, the framed narrations prevent immediate gendered conclusions. In the final vignette, a robot synthesises walls by attaching bricks in a curved pattern, automatically translating an image into stone. As we are shown that bricks can correspond to pixels, we are also left thinking about the possibilities and sites of post-work futures.

Entering the main room upstairs, Labour in a Single Shot (2011–ongoing) was impressively installed on five scaffold structures spread in the central area of the gallery. Hung in twos on each scaffold, the screens faced opposite directions, allowing for open sound. The ten screens corresponded to a selection of ten cities where filmmaking workshops with participants have taken place. Farocki and Ehmann led the Labour in a Single Shot project between 2011 and 2014, and Ehmann has continued with it since 2017. The workshops feed a growing archive of films made by participants. In Dundee, the screened films were credited on illuminated placards (one for each city) leaning against the scaffolds. The workshops follow a logic of delegation or training, as participants are given specific filmmaking parameters: to produce in a single shot, that is, without cuts, videos of one or two minutes in length, with the camera being static, panning or travelling. The umbrella theme is, of course, labour, understood broadly in terms of materiality, remuneration or historicity. Echoing Farocki’s skillset in In Comparison, the main aim of the delegated camera work is for participants to introduce narrative, suspense or surprise into what can be a tedious, repetitive or uneventful process. Working questions include: whose labour is
often invisible or underrepresented? What is in the centre; what occurs in the periphery? What kinds of labour processes set cinematographic challenges? All the films that were screened in the main room in Dundee have, indeed, excelled in creating short captivating documents out of incredibly diverse contexts of work. So far, *Labour in a Single Shot* includes over three hundred films that can be accessed online via the project’s web catalogue, which archives the films based on location and categories of labour activity, such as ‘animals’, ‘advertising’, ‘construction work’, ‘lab work’, ‘transport’, ‘water’ and ‘muscle work’.6 The project encapsulates Farocki and Ehmann’s collaborative vision and filmmaking legacy by allowing the central focus on labour to become the platform for other filmmakers’ voices and authorship. This is not necessarily a common feature in contemporary socially-engaged or participatory art where (delegated) participants often have neither authorship nor substantial creative voice, despite having offered their collaboration. On a different note, one might observe that the delegated video format of *Labour in a Single Shot* stands as a preceding counterpoint to the feature of ‘stories’ (introduced in 2016) on the social media platform Instagram. This oppositional relation could be considered analogous to *Workers Leaving the Factory* finding no fertile grounds on television or advertising archives.

Continuing into the exhibition’s second upstairs room, visitors first encountered a study area set up in the spirit of the gallery’s programming ethos, which sees the gallery as an open learning space for everyone. Abundant reading material was available for perusal by gallery visitors. Alongside texts by Farocki, who began his engagement with film through writing, there were

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reflections by writers, artists, philosophers, curators and critics on Farocki’s work. There were also key texts by the Marxist thinker and member of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, and the agitprop theatre director Bertolt Brecht, both of whom were central influences for Farocki. Further available literature on labour included significant texts by feminist activists and thinkers, such as Silvia Federici’s writings on social reproduction and precarious labour, and the Black Marxist thinker Cedric J Robinson’s remarkable analysis on labour, capitalism and slavery.7 The study area also included two documentary films: Film Books (1986), which features Farocki leafing through books about film, discussing how films and images are produced, represented and reflected through language and text, and Catch Phrases – Catch Images (1986), a conversation between Farocki and the Czech-born, Brazilian media philosopher, writer and journalist, Vilém Flusser, best known for his book Towards a Philosophy of Photography (1984). These two films, together with the reading material in the study area, operated as a crucial addendum to the rest of the show, as they offered multiple fascinating clues into Farocki’s own artistic and intellectual labour.

The final of the three main films included in ‘Consider Labour’, Georg K Glaser – Writer and Smith, was projected in the same room as the study area, further over to the right, and visitors could listen to the soundtrack using headphones. The film revolves around Farocki’s conversations with Georg K Glaser, a writer and smith who worked with metal. Glaser was born in Germany in 1910, ran away from home at an early age, joined communist groups and was placed in reform institutions. In 1933, he fled to France where he gained citizenship and worked for the national railways. Following his conscription in 1939, he soon found himself in German captivity, during which he often had to pretend he was a French national fluent in German, rather than German himself. After the war, he returned to France where he worked for the car manufacturer Renault, but the experience of the conveyor belt, to which Glaser refers graphically in the film, was insufferable to him and eventually he abandoned this work and spent the rest of his life in Paris as an artisan craftsman, imbuing both his writing and his metalwork with his critical thought. In the film, we see Glaser in his workshop and at his home, sitting at his writing desk. He speaks earnestly of his anxiety to transfer, while he still can, the entirety of his thought onto paper, and the inexpressible labour of having to contain it within text. We also see him irrevocably stating that action precedes the word, which is consonant with the pride that he takes in his metalwork being first and foremost useful. Farocki probes Glaser on the extent of mindfulness or deliberation in what appears to be a repetitive hammering process, as he shapes plates of metal into objects such as bowls, lamps, vases and jugs. Glaser explains that there is no automation: every move involves mindful calculation based on the new condition that the previous move delivered on the material, even when the brain achieves the dexterity required for the work to take place efficiently or seemingly automatically. Glaser also seems to value the making process (and usefulness) over and above the financial value

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of the produced objects, as, to avoid wasting material, he keeps making them, even when selling them might no longer be financially sensible. Overall, through his questions, Farocki invites Glaser’s unique insight on a division of labour that could be seen as precious or even utopian: a timed balance between artfully producing useful products and engaging in creative self-reflection. Glaser also hints at the possible obstructions of this balance in a political economy that periodically expels forms of labour. More presciently for the arts today, craftsmanship continues to be viewed as intellectually or creatively inferior to (institutionalised) art-making, while most artistic or creative labour remains undervalued, unrecognised and exploited. Prompted by the film and questions around working-class cultural expressions, the artist Stella Rooney facilitated a reading and discussion workshop entitled ‘Living Machines’ as part of the Dundee exhibition. Focusing on Jacques Rancière’s topical text Nights of Labour (1981), which examines nineteenth-century factory workers’ poetry, letters, newspapers and journals, the workshop addressed the precarious nature of labour implicit in the contemporary gig economy and the resurgence of mass labour strikes across the UK today.

‘Living Machines’ was part of the outstanding public events series through which ‘Consider Labour’ spoke to urgencies of the present and expanded the collaborative ethos of the displayed artworks. The series kickstarted with the show’s preview, which included an inspiring live panel discussion that featured Ehmann, the writer and organiser layla-roxanne hill, the curator and academic Sarah Perks, and Hao as chair. Another highlight was undoubtedly the video-making workshop for Labour in a Single Shot in Dundee, facilitated by two Dundee-based artists,
Gair Dunlop and Pernille Spence, and devised in close conversation with Ehmann. As Hao notes, the workshop offered a first-hand exploration into Farocki’s critical vision, elucidating ‘how images of labour constitute a particular thread of the cinematic, and importantly how imagery of labour can never be viewed as being politically neutral’. Films made by students, filmmakers, artists and researchers were screened in subsequent events at the Goethe-Institut Glasgow, and Cooper Gallery. Ruth Ewan collaborated with the Glasgow-based musician and singer, Debbie Armour (whose last two albums have been included in The Guardian’s Top Ten Folk Albums of the Year in 2020 and 2022), to host a powerful and moving Listening Party entitled She Works Hard for the Money. This was a live event of singing and storytelling that explored the category ‘Work’ in Ewan’s ongoing music archive, A Jukebox of People Trying to Change the World, which includes a collection of two thousand songs, selected for their progressive agenda, and organised into over seventy categories. Channelling Dundee’s labour history, the event referred to the city’s historical reputation as ‘She Town’, due to the majority of its workforce being women. The selected singing material spanned over four centuries, ranging from pre- to post-industrial periods, detailing both paid and unpaid labour. Mostly told from the perspective of women, the song lyrics speak of ongoing work-related struggles, including precarity, care and reproductive labour. The songs are attached to labour contexts, such as harvesting fields, labouring in the mills, cleaning city offices, nursing on a nightshift, sex work, and trying to get a baby to sleep. The gendered struggles of domestic workers featured centrally in this public programme through a film screening and

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8 Sophia Yadong Hao, personal communication, 2023
Q&A event with the artist Rehana Zaman and Marissa Begonia, Founding Member and Director of The Voices of Domestic Workers, as part of Dundee Women’s Festival. Zaman’s film *Some Women Other Women and all the Bittermen* (2014) combines ‘Bittermen’, a six-part fictional soap opera on the takeover of Tetley’s Brewery during the early 1990s, with footage documenting the meetings of Justice for Domestic Workers Leeds over the course of 2014 as they began to organise around restrictions to their employment rights within UK immigration laws. The film developed over a two-year period and involved research interviews with ex-Tetley’s Brewery workers and a tentative collaboration with migrant women workers from Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW, currently The Voices of Domestic Workers). Despite the temporal, political and cultural gaps between the stories of these two groups, the film illuminates common concerns relating to sites of labour and working-class identity as framed through gender and race. Ehmann and Hao also co-curated a screening programme of other significant but less seen works of Farocki’s at the Goethe-Institut Glasgow, including *The Silver and the Cross* (2010), *An Image by Sarah Schumann* (1978) and *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at Work on a Film Based on Franz Kafka’s unpublished novel ‘Amerika’* (1983).

‘Consider Labour’’s contribution to both Farocki’s legacy and wider labour-minded practice was kaleidoscopic. It did justice to the idiosyncrasy of an iconic artist and filmmaker, delving deep into nuances and underexplored affinities. It presented a specific and comprehensive temporal narrative in its curation of the main films, beginning from 1995, leading to the present-day (posthumous and ongoing) and appending a revealing prehistory (the 1980s), where the lens looked more inwards into Farocki in conversation with himself and others. Crucially, the exhibition was based on productive collaborations: with Ehmann; with other artists, curators and organisations for the public programme; and with filmmakers (in Dundee and ten other cities). This prevented Farocki’s style and political legacy from being shelved as another great ‘authority’, and instead catalysing some generative contemporary reverberations. Exhibitions like ‘Consider Labour’ could not be more welcome today, when labour, in all its forms, is yet again the centre of renewed social, economic and ecological struggles, whilst the hyper-competitive, pyramidal conditions of artistic and creative labour are ceaselessly discouraging and exploitative, often despite the widespread discourse (and policy) on inclusivity.

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