

This project roams the proletarian memory of the Vallès region, historically and politically part of the so-called “red belt” of Barcelona. Taking as its starting point the factory as a symbolic, ideological and social setting, the video installation presented is a story in seven episodes, a polyptych on the new iconographies of work.

Claudio Zulian

VALLÈS: MANUFACTURING PASTS, MANUFACTURING FUTURES



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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Vallès: Manufacturing Pasts, Manufacturing Futures is a project with which Claudio Zulian roams the proletarian memory of the Vallès region, historically and politically part of the so-called “red belt” of Barcelona.

Taking as his starting point the factory as a symbolic, ideological and social setting, the artist explores, at the same time, workplaces and living spaces, material heritage and migrant worldviews, the notion of community shaped around a series of hinges or in a perpetual state of being defined.

However, *Vallès: Manufacturing Pasts, Manufacturing Futures* is also an invitation to think about what horizons take shape for times to come, what new codes of mobilisation and public voice are likely to arise out of the industrial suburbs, what part the factory will play in the 21st century, within a transnational economy directed by the elites of financial capitalism, in the wake of the drastic paradigm shift in the labour statute and the role of the workers.

This proposal, which started up in 2017 as a result of a complex process of dialogue and cooperation between four Vallès town councils (Cerdanyola del Vallès, Ripollet, Sabadell and Terrassa), gradually revealed its stages of development in very diverse formats.

Thus, at Cerdanyola Art Museum, under the title *Utopias*, visitors were shown three video installations, preceded by the piece *Work-in-progress*; at Ripollet Cultural Centre, *The Journey* and *Industrial Estates*, with photographs and an audiovisual piece; at Sabadell Art Museum, *Images in the Shadow of Time: the Factory*; and at the Civic Centre of the neighbourhood of La Maurina and Muncunill Hall in Terrassa, *At Night We Built the Houses*. In addition to these exhibitions, a series of workshops, roundtables, meetings and talks were held, with specific features in each town.

The installation at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge takes the form of an audiovisual story in seven episodes—*The Factory*, *The Working Girl*, *The Journey*, *Industrial Estates*, *The Tower*, *At Night We Built the Houses* and *Utopias*—that together make up a polyptych of sorts, in which we glimpse a possible history for the new proletarian images.

From Bertolt Brecht's alienation to Sergei Tretyakov's distance, from Leslie Kaplan's factory literature to Harun Farocki's looped panoramas or Nanni Balestrini's collages of thoughts and slogans, there is a thread in the expanded cinema, social theatre and political literature of the 20th century that Zulian summons through this work, as if productivism were still awaiting an unexpected turn of the screw.

Georges Didi-Huberman tells us that peoples are in a perpetual process of representation, and at the same time in invariable danger of concealment, i.e., they are simultaneously "overexposed" and "underexposed". Something similar could be said about the workers, invoked from any political, economic or artistic flank, yet at the same time missing from each and every epistemology promoted by the middle classes over the last half century. It is hardly surprising, then, that the emotional drain down which whole regions of proletarian dissidence disappeared has also swallowed up those snapshots that document the new emancipatory struggles in the workplace.

Claudio Zulian investigates precisely this crossroads between the sentimental worldviews of the class struggle, the symbolic nostalgia of workers' culture and the hypothetical renovations of all this. In other words, he analyses what part of the revolution continues to be formulated from the field of images and what part has led to a merely aesthetic diagnosis. To this end, he roams the industrial landscape and turns it into a performative setting, wanders through the migrant memory and presents it without its usual humanitarian condescension. Equally, he delves into the iconographies of the people until he extracts from them, rather than a diagnosis that detects the contradictions of the system, a still valid theory and praxis of transformation, a proposal for the future.

Transparent factories, opaque bodies Claudio Zulian

A factory is a place to see and to be seen: the architect has laid out the spaces not only taking into account the placement of the machines, but also to prevent the existence of blind spots. The workers must be visible and their movements controllable. The gaze that controls them, however, must be invisible. As we know, the factory is an avatar of the panopticon and its project of inescapable transparency¹. There is a theatrical dimension to this device of visibility, and the camera that reproduces it has an obvious first location: at a certain height, at the back, where the space is revealed in its entirety and all the movements of all the workers can be recorded. The great majority of images of factories have been produced from this position: images that enabled and continue to enable architects and capitalists to check the correctness of their plans, images that publicise the power and the appeal of the company, images that gawp spellbound at the enormity of the space and the infinite repetition of movements, images that criticise the oppression of the workers.

Yet now, when a camera is placed there, what is revealed is the naked device: the factory is empty. It shows with clarity a diagram that seems to have ceased to be functional. It is not just the vast amount of abandoned premises to be found in Barcelona's industrial county of the Vallès—as in so many other European and North American industrial areas. Many of the big open-plan spaces of those factories that continue to function and produce are empty too, or nearly so. Automation has depopulated them.

The abandonment of the big factories, in the post-Fordist reorganisation of capitalism, can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be understood that this is how capitalism dismantles workers' movements, finds new modes of control and achieves greater gains. But on the other hand, it can be considered that it is the resistance of those same workers

1. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 1975.

that has prevented the panoptic project of the big factory from reaching its full potential, by forcing capitalism to seek new ways of doing things. Here I am referring not only to the great workers' struggles, but also to the day-to-day resistance to that gaze that sought to pin down workers like insects in a display cabinet—not quite dead, though, as they were required to make a few functional movements. The abandonment of the factory can be read as a victory of the body: always carnal, always opaque, always, somehow or other, safe². Some painters of the period of the great manufacturing industries, such as Joan Planella³, perceived this other image clearly. The humanist and even religious framework of their culture enabled them to focus on the corporeality of the workers, so often despised not only by capitalism and its cultural expressions but also by leftist movements. They portrayed them as sick, wistful and tired, yet in their pain, alive and even beautiful, as in *The Working Girl*. Contrary to the usual reading, these pictures and the aesthetic pleasure they cause can be seen as a victory of the body, both that of the model and that of the onlooker. Perhaps this is why these pictures have not come to form part of any canon: leftist puritanism disdains them for their sensuality and bourgeois aestheticism cannot bear them because they represent the workers. In addition to this, now, in the age of consumer capitalism, no one is identified anymore by their work, but by their forms of leisure. Twofold oblivion.

The site on which a factory is set, the industrial estate, is defined in Spanish by an exact word: *polígono*, literally a polygon. The project of radical transparency that involved gathering together the workers into a space without shadows is extended to the location, which is reduced to a flat geometric figure with no other characteristics than its surface area. Here too, the viewpoint, the most natural place from which the image is produced, is one: the conical perspective that before being projected on a plain or a river valley was a drawing

2. Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, 1980.

3. Joan Planella y Rodríguez, Barcelona 1849-1910.



Frame from the video installation *Utopias*, 2019



Frame from the video installation *The Factory*, 2019



Frame from the video installation *The Tower*, 2019



Frame from the video installation *The Working Girl*, 2019

on a plan—an attempt at abstraction. The camera, as an artefact, feels at home with this perspective—that of the single, open, immobile eye of the town planner and the architect. Many questions could be asked here about that first image produced by the Lumière brothers⁴: a diagrammatic fixed shot of workers leaving a factory that belonged to the family. In any event, nowadays the camera can easily be moved around the space. It can record the impact of other bodies: future workers who arrive untamed, prepared to defend their own body. Prepared to show that polygons are impossible.

Industry has not only produced town planning and architecture that imply a radical simplification of place by trying to make it coincide with the image-project. It has also crisscrossed the landscape with railways—and then motorways. The landscape becomes an image due to the rails that plough across it and the windows of the train from which we look out over it. Again, the Lumière brothers were quick to make explicit the profound relationship that exists between the train and moving images⁵. Woods, valleys, villages—which industrial estates seek to flatten and regularise—inhabit, from train windows, the first screens. The journey, however, has lost none of its mythopoeic capacity. Quite the opposite: the landscape disjointed by speed that we see through the window, in its strange relationship with the real becomes analogous with dreaming. All its details are commonplace, but they are reorganised into an unexpected experience of time and space.

So, in the train that takes them to a new land, immigrants dream doubly: from weariness and from the experience of perception altered by technology. In the difference between the real and the dreamt, the possibility of a transformation is preserved. Here we have nothing less than a biopolitical crossroads, analogous to the interval between the manifest and the intensely occult of some artistic images. This is where, again, the project of the transparency of industrial estates fails, not only because of the opacity of the

4. Louis Lumière, *La Sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon*, 1895.

5. Louis Lumière, *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, 1895.

workers' bodies but also because of the unpredictability of their dreams, which keep the future open and the past too.

The impossibility of the factory has led the panopticon project to raise the stakes. It is no longer a matter of constructing transparent spaces, with a place reserved for power from which to see without being seen, but of trying to make all social space transparent. To this end, thanks to new technologies, huge amounts of moving images are created through surveillance cameras of all sorts. The exploitation of certain properties of images as iconic acts has thus become widespread⁶: their performative potential, their capacity to produce automatic consequences on reality, without discursive translation—for example, the effect of a facial recognition, by means of a camera, of a person at a border. Furthermore, contrary to what is commonly thought, the theatricalisation inherent in the panopticon—due to the present yet hidden gaze of power—has also become widespread. Boris Groys⁷ reminds us that even our conversations on the web, far from being a moment of non-mediation, always involve the presence of an observer, a third party listening in.

And what are those offices in those transparent towers, if not a great theatre of irremediable visibility? However, once again, it is a troubled body that is encased by the sheets of glass. It is opaque; it does not allow itself to be passed through entirely. And the light that reaches the body through the glass from the outside world works to its advantage: it allows it to become visible—even to itself—in its corporeality and its sensuality. Those transparent buildings are the setting of something that can be likened to an Annunciation, an atheistic and almost deceptive one, in which the angel doesn't come, but the light from another world does—from a world that is not only possible but real. The light that was there before consumer capitalism. Thanks to this light, the surveillance cameras record, with their ubiquitous monocles, the working bodies; they recognise their faces and their movements.

6. Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, 2017.

7. Simon Dawes, *Interview with Boris Groys*, 2011.

But thanks to this light it is also possible to render visible the theatricality of all this, by showing the sensitive body on which it falls, exhibited and isolated, in its glass cage and at the same time in its landscape.

Natural light is a time: it changes constantly. It goes from orange to violet, indigo and Prussian blue. The cycle of night and day remains the same, but the exact quality of the light does not: tomorrow at the same time it might be overcast. The recorded image, on the other hand, can be physically (almost) the same: this is the abstract, immobile time of technology. The intersection between the time of natural light—and the body—and the time of technology causes a loop to occur. The corporeal and luminary overwhelms the instantaneous, it demands an interval, a story, but it gets trapped in the repetition of the recording. Will we always sit at the same desk, in front of the same computer, to work between apprehension and insubordination? The technical image says so, but the onlooker has a body that is also time and history.

The factory has undergone a radical mutation, from the utopia of a closed space, controlled and completely transparent to the unseen gaze of a power, to the present-day dissemination of physically crystalline spaces, of self-regulated and sometimes, as in consumption, almost imperceptible jobs. This mutation has been presented as “progress” and has kept alive the imagination of a completely technified utopian future in which there will be no effort, not even death. Technology and science have multiplied the images of the infinitely big and the infinitely small—traces of subatomic particles, structures of matter, edges of black holes—thus giving to the dimensions we inhabit—the light we see, the cities we move about in, a lifetime—the vintage air of an endearing thing of the past. However, in the perfect circularity of the huge and the tiny, the body continues to ask questions. In the “future” maybe work will be a game, but the body weighs heavy and is hard to lift. If, in addition, we want to lift it gracefully, then we need specialists, trained acrobats. What will our training be like then? Will it be compulsory? Will we be stricken by transparency or will we succeed in continuing to be opaque?

Vallès: manufacturing pasts, manufacturing futures

The Vallès is an industrial region located to the north of Barcelona. It has been one of the most outstanding centres of textile production in Spain, and the scene of major workers' struggles. Since the 1980s, it has undergone a process of deindustrialisation and industrial restructuring towards the services sector and R&D.

1. *The Factory*. Interior of what was once Cal Pissit textile mill, in Sabadell. Built in 1843, it is one of the city's oldest factories. It stands on the corner of Sol street and Alemany street, very close to the centre, which enables us to imagine the impact of industrial development on the cityscape. Disused for decades now, its location also makes it a sort of urban "unconscious".

2. *The Working Girl*. Named after the picture painted by Joan Planella y Rodríguez in 1885, which can be seen in the video installation. This is a copy by the painter himself of another larger picture of his, which was a great success at the time of its presentation. The issue of child labour was topical in those years: in 1884 a Royal Order was issued to ensure compliance with an earlier law that regulated and limited child labour. The picture is now owned by the History Museum of Catalonia, in the warehouse and conservation workshop of which this footage was shot.

3. *The Journey*. Shot on the RENFE R4 train line, between the stations Sant Andreu Arenal and Sabadell Sud. This line has connected the different towns of the Vallès since 1856: its passengers have witnessed all the region's urban and industrial transformations since then. The actors are Eric Anca, Fran Dorado, Ainhoa Gutiérrez, Carlos Luque and Paula Martínez, all children or grandchildren of migrants who settled in the Vallès in the 1950s and 1960s.

4. *Industrial Estates*. Shot in Ripollet, in Carrer Besòs, a street belonging to an industrial estate built in the 1960s, the buildings of which are still in use. The actors are Eric Anca, Rita De Las Heras, Fran Dorado, Ainhoa Gutiérrez, Carlos Luque, Paula Martínez, Toni Mur, Erica Saraiba and Tania Vidal, all children or grandchildren of migrants who settled in the Vallès in the 1950s and 1960s.

5. *The Tower*. Footage shot in the offices of the companies Active Business & Technology SL and Afirma Gestión SL, on floor 19 of Torre Millenium in Sabadell. Inaugurated in 2003, it is the tallest office building in the city and stands on the so-called Eix Macià, an urban development project of the 1990s aimed at promoting the services sector. The actress is Elisabet Sallés, PR manager of the business group. Through the plate glass windows, in the foreground we see the city of Sabadell, and in the background the silhouette of the massif of Sant Llorenç del Munt, a landmark for the whole Vallès region.

6. *At Night We Built the Houses*. Shot in the neighbourhood of La Maurina in Terrassa, in Escultor Clarà street and Las Meninas passage, among other locations. La Maurina is an essentially self-constructed neighbourhood, built in a ravine, which the residents themselves, an overwhelming majority of whom were migrants, also gradually urbanised. The title refers to the fact that in the 1950s and 1960s, in order to dodge demolition orders due to lack of planning permission, the residents put up the walls and roof of their houses in one night.

7. *Utopias*. Footage shot in the Alba Synchrotron, located in the park of the same name, a science, technology and business platform in Cerdanyola del Vallès. Inaugurated in 2010, its users include companies and universities from all over the world. The acrobats are Thomas Colle, Théo Corre, Leticia Despeyroux, Sergio Gómez, Paula Guerrero, Carlos Francós Peré, Jeanne Serie and Helena Sirugue.

Curator: Valentín Roma

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**La Virreina Centre de la Imatge
Palau de la Virreina
La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona**

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