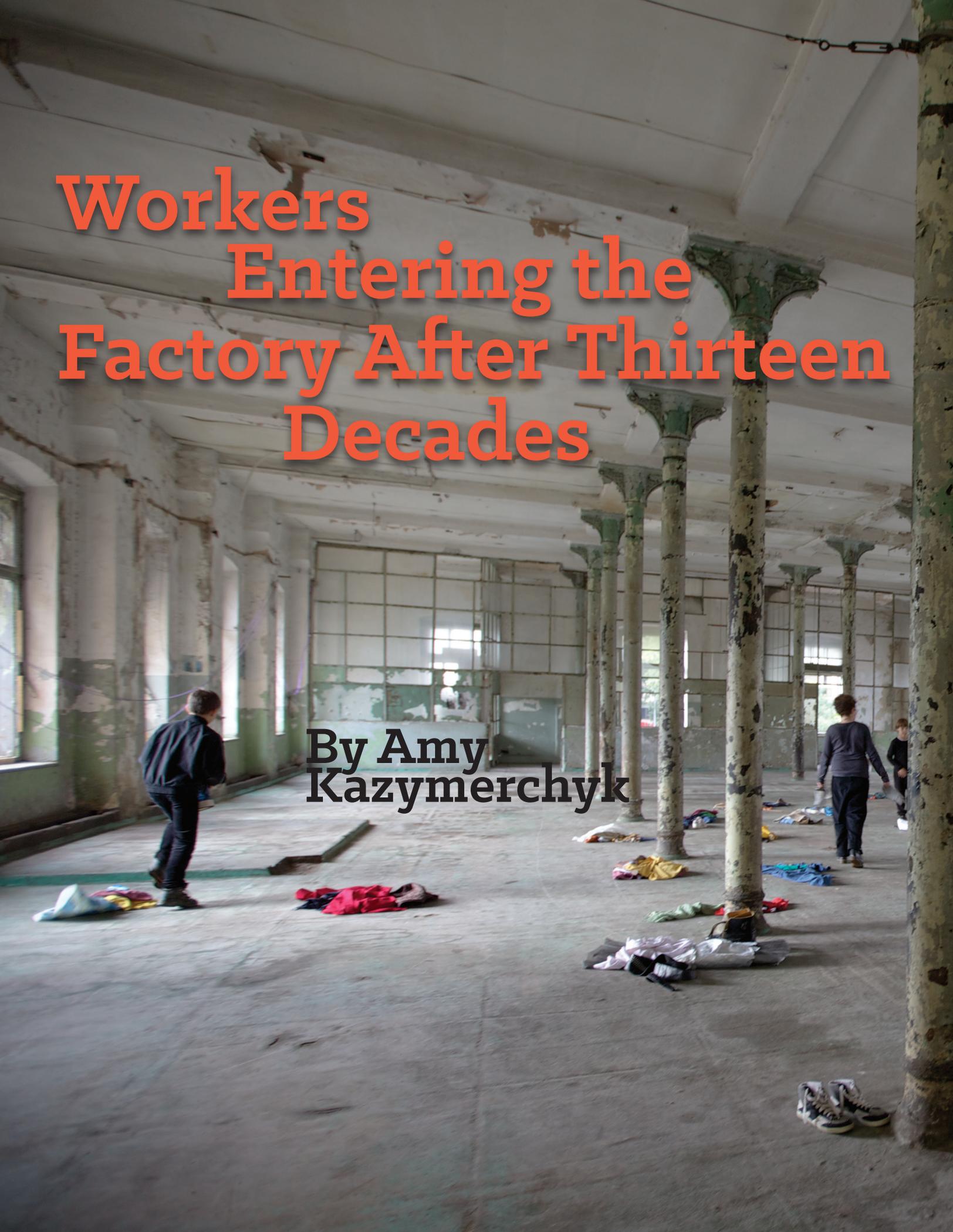


Workers Entering the Factory After Thirteen Decades

By Amy
Kazymierchuk







Althea Thauberger's most recent work is a fifty-seven minute film titled, *Preuzmimo Benčić* (*Take Back Benčić*) (2014). The project was initiated in Rijeka, Croatia on the site of the former Rikard Benčić factory, which was decommissioned in the early 1990s following the dissolution of the communist states, and the Yugoslav war. Since 2000, the citizens of Rijeka have endured a protracted bureaucratic process to re-purpose the factory as a centre for the city's Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, civic museum, library, emerging cultural industries, and a hotel.

The film was supported by the Musagetes Foundation in Guelph, Ontario and Rijeka's Department of Cultural Affairs, who have collaborated on cultural projects since 2009. In January 2013, Thauberger was introduced to a network of artists in Rijeka who were actively responding to the economic proposal and political process for the

re-development of the site. Thauberger initiated the film as a framework for continuing a critical and generative dialogue about the multiple values of the factory, the restructuring of Rijeka's political economy, and the paradigms of cultural industries. She worked with local theatre professionals, educators, choreographers, costume and makeup designers, film professionals, and a cast of sixty-seven performers between the age of six and fourteen years old. Over six weeks, Thauberger's cast and crew experimented with collaborative and improvisational games, choruses, interviews, drawings, texts and choreographies that developed the critical dialogue about the Benčić factory. Documents of these theatrical experiments comprise the film *Preuzmimo Benčić*.

Like many of Thauberger's art works that endure social, theatrical and textual processes, *Preuzmimo Benčić* is finally articulated as cinema. Cinema—as a material, a social architecture, an industrial economy, and an ideology—is both a catalyst for and product of shifts from industrial to post-industrial production, material to immaterial forms of labour, socialist to capitalist politics, and modernist to post-modernist ideology. The fatigue and precarity that these shifts have produced in Croatia aggravate the progress of Rikard Benčić's development. As cinema, *Preuzmimo Benčić* is both catalyst and product of this fatigue and precarity.

We want to take over the Factory because no one wants it. So we have more space to do something. For instance, a film.¹

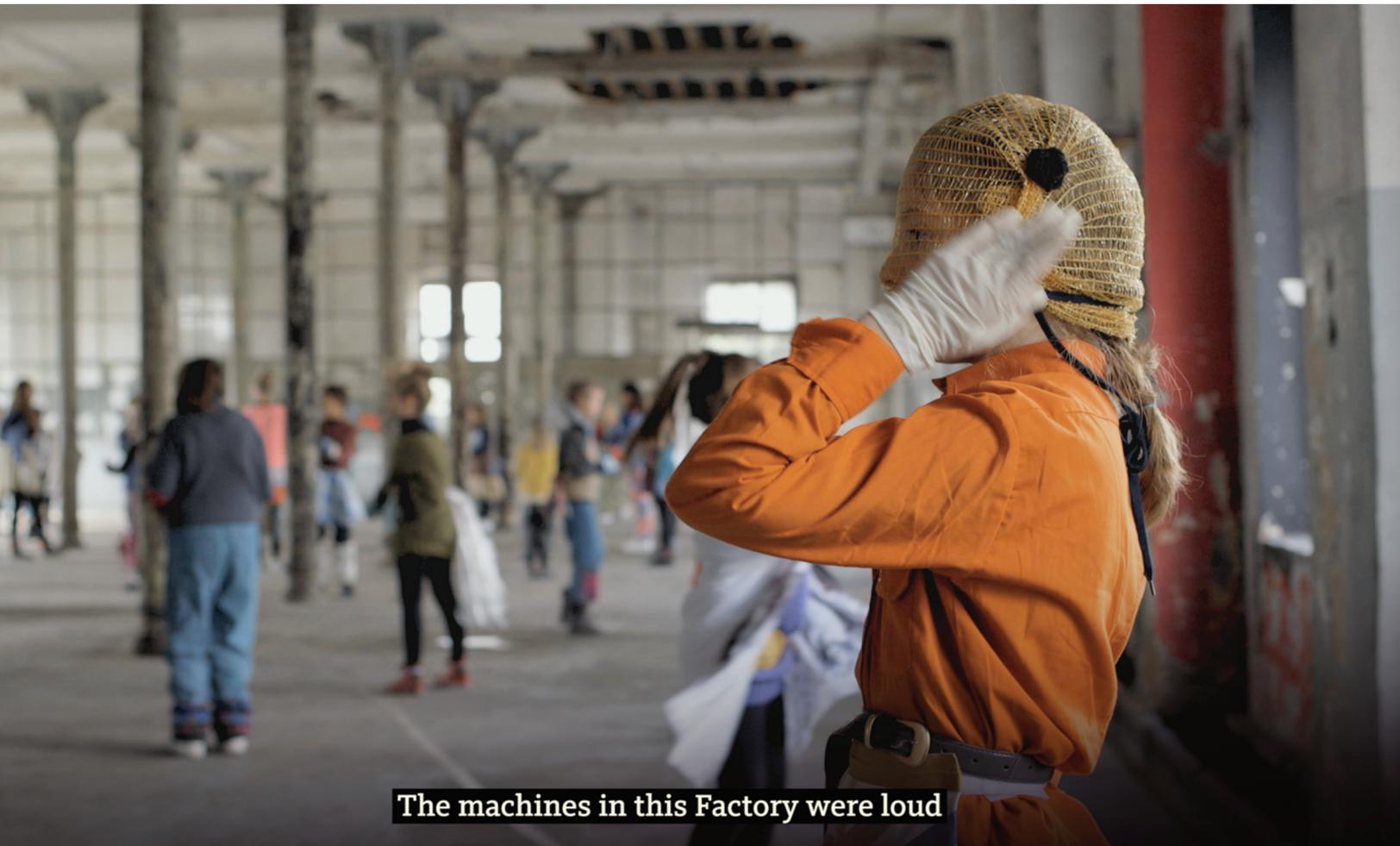
Ten minutes into *Preuzmimo Benčić*, the image cuts to black and a chorus of voices chanting, "Give us the key!"; envelops the darkness. The chant dissolves into a victorious holler over the sound of a lock being opened. As a door is cracked ajar in the distance, a beam of light articulates the silhouettes of actors streaming into the dim factory and rushing past the camera.

The scene cuts to a clean factory floor, scattered with piles of clothing. The actors run amongst the piles—floppy, distracted and curious. The sequence cuts between wide shots that reveal the improvisational chaos of actors zig-zagging between the factory columns, gazing out the windows and playing with each other's clothes, and intimate close-ups of a single actor focused on interpreting and assembling her costume. Once dressed, the cast quieten and the low hum of mouths mimicking machines permeates the factory. Each actor initiates a simple repetitive gesture illustrating various forms of mechanical and physical labour, such as

Page 38-38: Althea Thauberger, *Preuznimo Benčić*, production stills, photo by Milica Czerny Urban. All images courtesy of the artist, Susan Hobbs Gallery and Musagetes. **Opposite Page:** *Preuznimo Benčić*, production stills. **This page:** *Preuznimo Benčić*, video stills.



primarily because if we were workers we'd have to go back to the past



The machines in this Factory were loud



firing pistons, pulling levers, moving products across a conveyor belt, or heaving large sacks. As each actor refines the articulation and pace of her gesture, so too, the group becomes physically and audibly synchronized in a mechanized trance.

In this scene, the actors perform imagined gestures of labour, and through them, re-imagine Rikard Benčič's nearly 220-year history as a sugar factory, then tobacco factory, then ship and machine parts factory. Though the actors were all born after 2000, the year the cultural centre was first proposed, the actors embody subjectivities that were formed in very distinct political and economic times. These young actors enter history through cinema, and they enter cinema through the factory gates. One of the earliest moving images bonded cinema to issues of labour in a factory setting, thereby anticipating a trajectory of entwined development between the three that is evident in *Preuzmimo Benčič*.

At the beginning of cinema, workers leave the industrial workplace.

The invention of cinema thus symbolically marks the start of the exodus of workers from industrial modes of production.²

In 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière shot forty-five seconds of motion picture film showing workers exiting the gates of the Lumière factory for photographic goods in Lyon-Monplaisir, France. Though not the very first sequence of motion picture to be shot, *La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon / Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* is commonly regarded as the first work of cinema. The Lumière's presentation of this film within a program of ten comprised one of the first public screenings of the moving image, occurring in 1895, in Paris. The brothers charged an admission fee, making it the first presentation of film as a mass culture and commercial medium. The Lumières had also engineered a lightweight portable cinématographe for the screening that allowed them to export their business venture and open cinématographe theatres in London, Brussels, Belgium and New York. *La Sortie des Usines Lumière à*



Preuzmimo Benčić, video still.

factory and is even repelled by it.³

In 1995, one hundred years after *La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon*'s first public screening, Harun Farocki produced a single-channel video, *Workers Leaving the Factory*, which reflects on representations of workers leaving their workplace over eleven decades of motion picture history. Farocki compiles excerpts from documentaries, industrial and propaganda films, newsreels and feature films showing workers outside the factory gates, on their way to or from their personal lives, striking, protesting, being locked out, or vying for hire. Workers are almost never (and not once in the selections that Farocki has made) pictured inside the factory, engaged in the gestures of their labour. Farocki observes that, "over the last century virtually none of the communication which took place in factories, whether through words, glances or gestures, was recorded on film."⁴

If the increasing absence of workers and factories in cinema from Europe and North America would evidence that the worker had left the factory for good, it is only an optical illusion distorting the real conditions. On the one hand, the factory has left the worker, and moved to a different site. On the other hand, the worker may have physically exited the factory, but in fact, has never stopped working.

The cinematic industry, which emerged in 1895, produces increasingly complex notions of 'industry', 'labour', 'value', and 'product' over its first century. The logic of cinema—that is, sustained attention towards a screen—has transformed and proliferated into television, video, computers, the Internet, and phones. Jonathan L. Beller calls this vast network of infrastructure the cinematic mode of production, and cites the screen and its web of logistics as de-territorialized factories.⁵

Lyon's achievement was not merely the introduction of a material process, but the inauguration of an industry.

Amongst the ten films screened in the 1895 program, *La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon* has left the most indelible imprint on history, perhaps because it pictures the consciousness (or unconsciousness) of its own production. The film captures the gestures of the workers who produced the photographic dry plates that images of the world were imprinted upon. These products in turn generated the capital that afforded the Lumière's to make, market, and disseminate their film works and inventions. However, the gestures of the workers' labour are never documented on film. Instead, cinema's first impetus to capture movement pictures workers, under direction, walking (with few exceptions) in formation, arms at their side and heads down, from within the darkness of the factory, off the edge of the frame of history.

The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory, but a century later it can be said that film is hardly drawn to the

Material labour in primary industries and factories is still required to produce the equipment, optical mechanisms, media stocks, processing chemicals and presentation hardware as required for cinema, but a tertiary industry of the spectators' "sensual labour" has also emerged. In this mode of production, the spectator (worker) enters the screen (factory) and through their sensual labour of watching, reading, clicking, liking, linking, re-posting, searching, downloading, playing, listening, uploading and commenting; they circulate value.

For example, viewers who encounter *Preuzmimo Benčić* in a cinema, contemporary art gallery or online may be captivated by the political tension, industrial backdrop or expressiveness of youth in the film. This curiosity and intrigue may lead a spectator to Rijeka's cultural and tourism website, to seek out Croatian films and literature on Amazon, to re-watch films made in factories on YouTube, or to write an article for a magazine—all of which create page hits for advertisers, lead to the consumption of other images, and produce new investments.

But this example is almost too simple. Cinema is not only the moving image we encounter on a screen, nor the infrastructure which produces the film, but the accumulation of the six billion ‘screens of consciousness’ that create the appearance of the world.⁶ The cinematic mode of production is driven by the endurance of our attention for image transmissions in public and private, interior and exterior, situated and in-transit locales.⁷ Like the regime of the assembly line, we suture these images together to produce commodity fetishes through looking—“as in the factory, in the movie theatre we make and remake the world and ourselves along with it.”⁸ This means that the attention of the spectator is always engaged, and thus, always working.

In her own exposition of related questions, Hito Steyerl looks to Harun Farocki’s museum installation, *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006), which spatializes his single-channel video by presenting a cinematic excerpt from each decade on eleven consecutive monitors (replicating a film sequence or assembly line). Steyerl observes that in this iteration of Farocki’s work, when the workers leave the factory, they walk out of the frame and into the art museum or gallery. In many cases, the art museum is situated in a redeveloped factory or industrial site, and in an eternal return, the worker is in fact re-entering the factory through a new industry of sensual, social and affective production — contemporary art.⁹

As artistic and political films and videos are increasingly exhibited within the white and black boxes of the art gallery, cinema becomes synonymous with the museum. Though, as Steyerl details, the relationships between cinema-factory and museum-factory are unique. Both cinema and the industrial factory are organized by temporal regulation, spatial confinement and discipline. Spectators and workers enter together, focus on a task, then leave together *en masse*. The museum and the new sensual factory are dis-organized by a-temporality, de-centralization and multi-focality. Workers and spectators set their own hours, multi-task, and drift in and out of attendance, as a multitude.¹⁰

Instead of striking a blow to sheet metal wrapped around a mold or tightening a bolt, we sutured one image to the next (and, like workers who disappeared in the commodities they produced, we sutured ourselves into the image).¹¹

The generation that is referred to as digital natives, post-millennials, the iGeneration or pluralist generation, and to which the cast of *Preuzmimo Benčić* belong, are natural labourers in this new sensual factory. In an illustrative scene in the film, the cast is gathered in a tiered cluster like a grade school class portrait. An off-screen crew member asks the group a question along the lines of, “when are you working?” A young actor responds that they are working when they are in the Rikard Benčić factory doing something for the film. Another responds that work is when the camera is on and it is filming. A third acknowledges that they are working, “right now, because the cameras are in front of us and they are filming us.” A second crew member asks them “are you more artist or worker?” One suggests that they would have to go back to the past to be workers. Another pontificates that they were workers before, they have never been artists, but now they are nothing.

This generation embodies the ethos of the plural, the a-temporal and the multitude, for whom distinctions between labour and looking, being and performing, action and affect are blurred. It is precisely this blurring that produces, and is produced by, sensual labour.

In the film’s culminating confrontation, the actors, playing the mayors, leave their city hall boardroom and enter the factory to present their proposal for Rikard Benčić’s future. The workers,



All this page: *Preuzmimo Benčić* video stills. Opposite bottom: *Preuzmimo Benčić*, production photograph, photo by Bruna Tomšić. Rest of opposite page: *Preuzmimo Benčić* video stills.



who are cleaning and repairing the factory, break to find a seat in front of the bureaucrats' panel. The mayors' presentation begins: "The importance of creative industry is recognized all over Europe. Barcelona, Helsinki, Gothenburg and some Italian regions have management departments for the development of creative industries ... One of its key conditions is multi-functionality ... The first and second floors of the T building are conceived as a main part of the permanent and temporary exhibitions of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art ..." The presentation continues to espouse the virtues of new public-private financing schemes and market competitiveness, until a worker interrupts by asking the mayor to speak up, "louder ... so we can hear you." What follows is an urgent, heartfelt, disruptive meeting in which the workers express their custodial concern for Benčić's heritage, their demands for stable employment, and their remorse for the loss of the way things used to be. By way of rebuttal, the mayors describe the economic restraints, the exhaustion of their empathy, and the authority of their foresight. At one point a mayor asks, "Do you think we should build a museum here, or start production again?" A worker affirms that the city is in need of a large museum, and even a library, and is asked by another worker, "Where will you work? A gallery or a museum?"

Like a child who repeats its first word for one hundred years to immortalize its pleasure in that first spoken word.¹²

When the actors enter the factory, there is no potential of *taking back* the conditions of the sugar refinery of 1768, the tobacco factory of 1851 or the ship and machine parts factory of 1947. These workers will never fire pistons, pull levers, move products across a conveyor or belt, or heave large sacks. When they enter the factory in 2014, they do so as workers of the factory's fourth industry: culture. Their labour is the endurance of image transmission, and their role on the assembly line is to suture their own image.

Preuzmimo Benčić is both a dialogue about the factory's future as a cultural industry and that factory's first production (which is already multi-national). Like *La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon*, *Preuzmimo Benčić* pictures both the consciousness and unconsciousness of its own production. The only difference now is that the workers never leave.

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Notes:

1. Althea Thauberger, *Preuzmimo Benčić (Take Back Benčić)*, HD video, (2014; Vancouver: Althea Thauberger/ Musagetes.)
2. Hito Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?," *e-flux journal*, no.7 (2009): 3, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-a-museum-a-factory/>
3. Harun Farocki, "Workers Leaving the Factory," *Senses of Cinema*, no.21 (2002): 3, accessed April 5, 2015, http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/harun-farocki/farocki_workers/
4. Farocki, "Workers Leaving the Factory," 3.
5. Jonathan L. Beller, "KINO-I, KINO WORLD: Notes on the cinematic mode of production," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 60, 80.
6. Beller, "KINO-I, KINO WORLD," 67.
7. Beller, "KINO-I, KINO WORLD," 61.
8. Beller, "KINO-I, KINO WORLD," 64.
9. Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?," 3.
10. Steyerl, "Is a Museum a Factory?," 5.
11. Beller, "KINO-I, KINO WORLD," 63.
12. Harun Farocki, *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik*, BetaSp video, (1995; Berlin: Harun Farocki Filmproduktion/ Werner Dütsch.)



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