

Thematics

Micro Histories

approaching art & ethnographic paradigms

The questions that were raised concerned all the practices. They did not suggest a common answer but instead a constellation of problematics to be dealt with. What are the ways of approaching field research? What is the role of the artist in the making of art that is created in negotiation with 'the other'? What are the ethical paradigms? What is the friction between the objective and the subjective? What kind of knowledge is produced or processed within these practices? What is the political stance of these approaches and their authorship? What is the relationship between micro and macro history? And last but not least, what kind of aesthetics emerge from these practices?

Conversations with Anu Pennanen & Stéphane Querrec, Einat Tuchman, Alessandra Coppola, Eleonora Sovrani and Agency

Anu Pennanen (FI) and Stéphane Querrec (FR)

Esther Severi: You are working on a particular subject – the closure of the Belgian branch of the Renault factory in Vilvoorde. When and why did you become interested in this topic?

Stéphane Querrec: When Anu and I started working together, we both felt that the idea of human obsolescence today was a very important topic. It has become commonplace inasmuch as people belonging to various classes find themselves treated or considered like rubbish because they have lost their job. So back in 2010 when I was in Belgium for a few weeks for an art project, I went to Limburg and visited the old mines there and I suddenly remembered the factory workers in Vilvoorde. In France, the workers at Renault Vilvoorde made themselves heard when they came to Paris and to the North of France to strike. That's how I found out about it at that time. Finding myself in front of those beautiful decaying factories in Limburg my immediate feeling was that visiting old factories is very romantic. However, the beauty overshadows the past and present working conditions in factories, and it does not reveal in particular the system operating within them and the relations at stake: those binding workers with other workers and their bosses. So I told Anu the story of Renault Vilvoorde and we started to think about what happens to workers who give 20 years or more of their life to their factory. Little by little we got into the subject by visiting

Vilvoorde before the residency at Bains Connective in order to do research and meet the workers. There was a slow process of getting to know them and of gradually building up trust over time. We understood that it would be beneficial to stay in Brussels longer in order to work with them and to be committed to the project.

Anu Pennanen: I've worked at specific locations in different cities such as Tallinn, Liverpool and Paris. I don't find working in Belgium particularly exotic. We were both trying to find an interesting site to trigger the work – an architecture or an environment that has a specific meaning now, but which is going to change in the future. Film is the proper means to treat a subject that is about to vanish because there is an aspect of commemoration attached to it as a medium. Stéphane presented the idea of the factory at Vilvoorde. It's a different kind of space because it has nothing of the romantic elements of old factories. In fact there are memories that are nostalgic and romantic, but the work itself and the way a factory functions is not romantic at all. We were also interested in the supposedly flat Belgian environment, which has a peculiar beauty. However, above all we wanted to bring to the fore the people, the end of their manual labour in the factory and the experience of obsolescence. Nowadays we can all relate to these changes in society because everyone is in danger of becoming obsolete at anytime.



Meeting of the hardcore group of strikers from Vilvoorde 1997, taken at the Bains Connective office in 2012. Organized by Anu Pennanen and Stéphane Querrec.

From left to right: Jan de Reymacker, Benny Pierard, Stan van Hulle, Albert Vanwin, André Fontaine, Danny Pierard and Patrick van Aelst

ES: During your stay at Bains Connective, you worked a lot on the contact with the workers. How did the communication with them take place? Were people willing to tell you about what happened? Were they interested in the fact that this was an artistic project?

SQ: The first ex-workers we met who answered our questions were as usual the people who wanted to talk about their lives, about what the situation was like for them now, about how it ended at the factory and their survival after that. We had to reframe our questions carefully, explaining that we were making a news story for a TV channel, that we were not making a documentary, and that we were not so interested in their personal history but rather in their collective history, as engaged members of a union, and as a group beyond unions.

They explained, for example, that workers can strike for a few weeks, and during these weeks the union pays the workers. The main motivation was to fight against the closure of their factory, but some of the workers, namely the 'hardcore group', decided to go beyond these secured weeks because they wanted to fight for their jobs and keep the factory open.

Among the workers the question at the time of the strike was: should we accept the redundancy payment the bosses are offering us or should we strike and negotiate to keep the factory open? Right here a division was strategically created by the bosses, and yet a few workers decided to unite in solidarity and lose money in order to fight for their rights as a group.

During our meetings with them we tried to create a collective discussion in order to get away from their personal histories. Of course, everyone had their own way of dealing with this situation, and on a personal level there were also tensions and different views back then. It was important to go beyond that, but even so we met the workers individually and heard their stories, views and experiences. Working in a factory gave them a real sense of identity, of belonging – the factory was a family history.

ES: Did they ask you questions about your project, about the making of the film?

SQ: The purpose of our stay at Bains Connective was to 'discover' our film. We didn't know exactly if we would take a documentary approach or a more fictional course of action based upon facts.

Before you actually come to a place and start working, you have a lot of ideas and projections about what you want to do and what it's going to be about. Being in the field, however, forces you to face the reality of your subject and you have to reposition the project little by little. We kept the ex-workers informed about how the project developed over a period of months. At first they thought they would be 'in' the film. Eventually they understood we needed their cooperation in the sense of giving us their views, their documents, letting us film in their places, and basically opening their doors to us.

AP: You can't really know how to make the subject visible until you go to the place itself and talk with people who are connected to it. It was interesting for us to discover how they all dealt with this traumatic situation, how different the reactions to the situation were, and what kind of outcomes they found for themselves. There are people whose involvement clearly goes beyond personal interest and they still have a sort of social or union mission. They are now active in local party politics, or doing things on a more global level, like sending packages to poor children in Africa. Some of them are employed in union organizations while others just found a new job. What is important for them is to keep the idea of solidarity alive.

After working with them we realized that it wouldn't be particularly interesting for them to be in the film. They don't need this process of looking at themselves. Their wish is that the subject is kept alive and talked about, not only in terms of what happened at Vilvoorde, but a more general or international discussion about work and critical unionism.

Eventually we wrote a scenario, based on everything we talked about with the workers, but it's fiction now. We will film with local amateur actors this autumn, who are aware of the subject because they followed it or worked in a union.

ES: When does the film take place? Do you go back in time?

SQ: The film takes place today and in the near future. It traces what happens after such a traumatic event and is entitled *Staande!Debout!* The film follows one fictional character called Felix, who is based on a real worker who was part of the hardcore group of strikers. He has been out of work for 15 years, and is a 70-year-old pensioner. The real former-worker who inspired this main character was actually one of the most traumatized people in the group of workers (with the exception of the ones who committed suicide after the closure) because he lost more than a job. In the process of the closure he lost his identity, his social contacts, and also his faith in society. The values of work dramatically changed for him, from one day to the next.

In our film the main character wonders what happened to his friends. He then starts looking for his former colleagues and strikers in order to convince them to gather together again, in memory of those who have died in the meantime. However, these encounters don't go the way he imagined they might. Some people are embarrassed, others have moved on, but all are in pain. They finally choose to meet at the *Raised Fist*, a steel sculpture commissioned by the workers and a union, erected between 1997-1998 and made by local sculptor Rik Poot. The *Raised Fist* is a very powerful symbol of struggle.

In reality the former Renault workers regularly meet there, usually at the time of the anniversary of the closure, the 27th of February.

AP: When you make a film, you can easily describe it as fiction or documentary, but I'm reluctant to put things into these categories. As an experimental filmmaker, being faced with the idea of formats or genres is a constant problem. You have to identify your film very clearly within certain kinds of parameters and I find this a little absurd. When the film is good, beautiful or also consciously ugly, it shouldn't be more important whether it follows the rules of a certain genre or not. This is a problem that you face as a filmmaker from the first step. An interesting project might be left aside just because the people who look at it don't manage to put it in one box. Formatting is absurd and dangerous, we are pre-formatting our minds.

ES: I think of experimental film as a genre in itself, in which you use elements of documentary, fiction, or a mixture of both.

AP: When you say experimental film, people immediately think of super 8 camera techniques - they think about a certain kind of film made in the 1970s when things were tried out technically.

ES: There seems to be a dissociation of the word experimental with what is new, with exploring, similar to how the word avant-garde is connected to artists at the beginning of the 20th century. The words have become more like a definition of a specific style.

AP: For me the experiment is more present on the level of the narration, but many people see experiment as something technical.

The experimental techniques of the 1970s have now become almost 'classic', and their aesthetics have been borrowed by the fashion industry, for example.

ES: Is there a reason behind the choice of the main character? Do you sympathize with him, personally or politically?

SQ: Not especially. There are many characters in the film, all with different views. When you work in fiction, you must be fair to all the characters and not express your own views directly through them. You have to be able to express different opinions, including the ones that you don't share yourself. Basically film is a place where you can ask questions, a place of different hypotheses, incarnated by characters.

Of course we were interested in putting the emphasis on the main character as somebody who is traumatized. But somehow everybody in that story was united by the trauma of the factory's closure. I use the word 'trauma' once again because that is exactly what it is in reality - here is someone whose identity was erased when he lost his job. The trauma is so deep, that he is literally 'not the same anymore' and will never be again. An external, unexpected event occurred and the workers often said that they hadn't been prepared for the closure. This event stopped their own feeling of time, right on Thursday the 27th of February 1997.

They still refer to themselves as ex-Renault workers and clearly cannot let go of the past.

Therefore we thought it was important to present that kind of loss, from different perspectives and from people who had made different choices.

Despite the variety of ways in which their lives turned out, and the range of views they have on the situation, in the end everyone gathers together in the memory of colleagues who died. At the same time the gathering commemorates the workers' own history, in which no one else is interested anymore. People are in general more concerned with the problems of today. That's why it's important to put this history into focus, with all the different views on it and to present different hypotheses about how to survive such a trauma after 15 years.

ES: What is clearly not in the film is the voice of the management, the voice from inside the factory, from the people that make the decisions. Was that a conscious choice? Did you have contact with anyone from the management?

SQ: We didn't want to go into that aspect of the story. We wanted to concentrate on obsolescence - being an obsolete person because other people decide upon it through their own arrogance and greed. For the management it's just an economic decision, there is no human perspective at all. We wanted to focus on the workers.

Manual workers still exist today but there are fewer and fewer of them. We wanted a proper representation of them by means of fiction, and not by placing different opinions side by side, like a TV documentary would do.

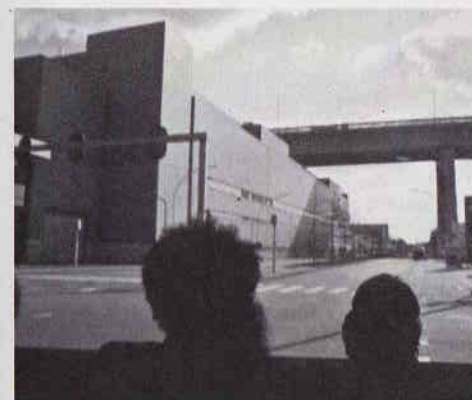
It's important that they are characters in a story, and that it's not about who is right or wrong. The film has become a universal story about a certain loss of identity and the question of solidarity.

ES: Do you feel that there is a tendency towards voicing your own opinion throughout your research, especially when you talk about the factory management not caring about the human consequences of their decision?

AP: The situation was and is highly emotive, so it required and requires strong opinions. In the factory there were of course managers, local people who had no choice but to follow the orders of the big boss. Since the late 19th century, in situations like this it has not been possible 'kill' the main boss. The main person in this particular conflict was not publicly lynched. Now he has a very good job and has continued his career.

SQ: Making a film is not like giving a diplomatic discourse. It's about taking a point of view that is decided upon early on in the process. We felt that these workers deserved to be the subject of a story. I think that the people who take decisions at any level already have enough representation in Hollywood. However, we aren't making heroes out of the workers, they are just normal people who suffer, struggle, give up sometimes, hesitate or act quickly.

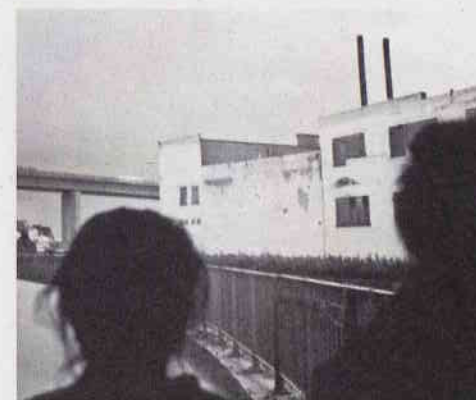
AP: If you want our point of view, it lies in the uncomfortable thought that accompanies the film. The idea that this kind of obsolescence could happen to everyone.



ES: In this Thematics residency, the research that participants have conducted is highly anthropological. How do you behave as artists delving into a social subject matter like the one concerning the workers at the Renault factory, going into a social situation, which is not connected at all to your living environment or your life in general? Is the artist as researcher becoming a voyeur?

AP: People in general are always trying to make new labels for things, such as 'the artist as social worker'. My mother is a social worker and so I know what it's about. It would be impossible for me to do that, I don't have the right skills at all. It's the same with research - I'm not a researcher like an academic researcher. I'm a 'flâneur' and I can do this whenever or wherever I like. It's like stepping out of the chains of production and consumption for a moment.

SQ: We are artists. To me, being an artist means being an author, which involves taking a stand and having a point of view. It is a very humble job.



To make this possible I need to gather people around me, listen to them, hear their points of view and at one point take some distance, which is what the fiction is meant for. The distance is crucial in that regard. The residency at Bains Connective gave us the time and space to observe the situation we were in with those workers, and observe ourselves during that process. We opened up our process to others and started talking about it. I remember a very interesting conversation with Elke Van Campenhout about the ethical problems of identification in films in general and in our project in particular. We had a passionate discussion about how to find disidentificatory practices. The way we have rerouted our film from a take on the real to a fiction has certainly something to do with it.

ES: Being an artist of course, comes down to practice.

SQ: 'Research' is too much of a big word. We only do a job, which is both manual and intellectual, we don't research, create discourse and publish something. One has to call a spade a spade. We are always talking about workers, but we are also workers!