

FrameWork 1/15

cheyanne turions and Kim Simon on Althea Thauberger

with

Abbas Akhavan, Peggy Gale, Neil Klassen, Patrick Howlett, Kelly Jazvac, Yaniya Lee, Colin Miner, and Charlotte Rousseau. Emily Vey Duke was unable to attend due to a cancelled flight.



cheyanne turions: Kim and I think that our conversation today could be with all of you as well. Feel free to contribute based on your observations.

I would like to begin by acknowledging our presence on the land of Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

I would like to talk about what it felt like to watch the film; I had many questions going through my mind while I watched. They were not about the film *per se* but rather related to the terms of its production. “How does somebody get access to a million kids?”, “Where did these costumes come from?”, “What is the relationship between the improvisation and structure in the material that these kids are speaking?”, and “What are the terms of this building in the city of Rijeka?” Kim and I have been trying to think through why that was my reaction. Did any of you have a similar reaction when you first watched it?

Patrick Howlett: It certainly seemed that there was a colossal undertaking just behind what we were watching.

Kim Simon: We were trying to figure out what was visible – if there was something actually visible in the film that was making us ask these questions or feel this way, or was it about what was *not* visible in the film? We thought about how the last two decades [have examined] the ethics of social and relational practice – and experiments with ethnographic or anthropological documentary practice. Also, whether it was by virtue of [Althea’s decision to] work with children that these questions were coming up or – and this is a cynical perspective – if we were only able to see these children as puppets for the organizers of the film... [Versus others, who have discussed] the images of these kids as symbols of purity and future... The film and what we are given to see is complicated because its organizing principles were based on the children's behaviour while the structures of the film – the [kid’s] conversations with the adults, the collaborating theatre and choral programs that were involved in the making of film, were not visible. We seem to be meant to take for granted that what these kids are saying is an authentic experience and yet everything in my being wanted to scream: “Noooooo!”

ct: There was definitely a sense of the uncanny – that these kids were not performing being children and yet, there was something about the play of imagination that you associate with childhood that was deeply inflected in scenes throughout the film.

Thinking outside of the terms of the film, the building [that was used in the film] exists in Rijeka and does not seem to be utilized as a factory or a cultural space, which are the main two propositions that were introduced. Is

this film in some background sense supposed to mobilize a conversation in favour of one those options over the other? I am not saying that I think the film is doing this, but rather it is a method for me to think about what the desired effect of the film was.

KS: There are use values to this project [that exist] on multiples levers...Musagetes, who funded the project, their mandate is to go into communities to think through the usefulness of creative practice as integral to citizenship and a community's livelihood. To me, it seems a fairly direct connection to part of their mandate to picture the re-use of this type of building as a museum or as a cultural space. There are multiple levels of institutions and apparatuses that come into play that were actually enacted by the kids.

I wonder, what do people think of the proposed equation of the artists and workers/labourers that is both spoken about in the film and in the apparatus of the distribution of the film – such as in the exhibition press release? Also, the conflation of that question of the 'factory as museum' and whether those things are the same – artists/workers, factories/museums – or, are they really separate concepts?

...

Abbas Akhavan: I think that there is a larger framing of how she uses actors and there is a moment where they lose agency or they don't know how the result of their presentation is going to come out. I am thinking about her work, *Songstress*, the Carroll Street project, and others. Something happens. I am sure in these discussion circles that the questions of exploitation or re-representation have come up. I think those are things that [Althea] is very much invested in. It is not a naïve, or a sinister, or a sadistic way of doing things – I think it is a very complex relationship. I don't know this work well enough...I am trying to understand how you guys are trying to...I think you are saying something but I don't get it.

Yaniya Lee: I think she is conscious of what she is doing. Kids and women have been seen in similar ways historically. Women were painted politically; they weren't seen as full human beings who had agency to do whatever they wanted to do. We still see kids as these things that need to be taken care of and perhaps we could give them more individuality and power. Maybe Althea was trying to point at this sense by using them in a way that pricks us and makes us uncomfortable.

ct: Saelan Twerdy, who analyzed Althea's previous large [photo] mural, "*Who is it that can tell me who I am?*" wrote that [the work] was asking a question or drawing attention to who the author is of the roles that we must play. I feel that this concern is repeated in this work. The work is trying to make us feel uncomfortable in whose voice those children are speaking – if it is their own, if it is regurgitation of their parents, or perhaps a construction of the script that came out of this research that we are sitting within. We are meant to think about where and how agency is negotiated.

Charlotte Rousseau: Although, we are given hints of it in the final credits such as "Original words by" with a list of all the participants. That is when I figured out that there was a script. Yes, they had sheets but they were awkwardly switching between reading the text and improvising...and then repeating adult language.

KS: There are moments [where that sense becomes evident], for instance, the scene where the kid...in the role of the Italian worker talked about how everyone was given characters and the ease of staying in them. There were certainly moments where they seem very childlike. Then there were other moments where it seemed like they were repeating expressions of their parents. I am sensitive to the question of how to work with children ethically or why to work with children. I am also wondering what can be opened up by working with children...

Kelly Jazvac: It is exactly this kind of second question that is where my interest lies. Rather than to make a critique of how the children should have been treated or worked with during the film but, what *is* visible in the film? What is it provoking? Part of that is the imaging of children in relation to my own expectations and desires. There is certainly tension when the children gave testimonies through scripts – whether from texts, or their parents, or their teachers about the history of this space. There is a socialist relationship to labour and the factory that just doesn't exist anymore – to be asked to enact that history to labour in the present tense and equate or compare it to being an artist in that space – it became muddy and complicated for me. Also, the film was not linear, obviously, in the ways that it was edited. It seemed that the footage was from experiments that the kids did.

These may have been, not random but, more experimental movement and gestures in order to get the kids comfortable with thinking about the materiality of the space – imagining the sounds of the machines which are juxtaposed with interviews of the kids as though they were literally in a class being interviewed or tested.

ct: The internal logic, or the internal chronology of the film, was not chronological either. I am really curious about their costumes. This is something that Emily [Vey Duke], Kim, and I talked about as we led up to this discussion. The film began with the children already embodying the characters that they were in the film and then a couple of minutes later they entered the factory and the costumes were sitting in these weird limp piles scattered throughout. Then there was a scene of them putting on the characters that they spent the rest of the film embodying. It is just not linear.

...

KJ: There was an over-imaging with the costumes of the kids as “kids”. The costumes felt like dress-up, with their quirkiness, their energy, and their colour and that seemed very deliberate. In the debate between the workers and the mayors there was a juxtaposition between playing dress up while trying to have this serious debate.

Peggy Gale: [The costumes] were quite fanciful and yes, there was a costume director but I think they were playing dress-up to an extent.

KS: I am saying that “dressing-up” was part of their character. I feel that they were directed to dress up.

Colin Miner: [Are you asking if] they led us to believe that the children were a part of that process of dressing themselves?

KS: No. Rather, that the constructed-ness of their character was, in part, to act as children playing dress-up.

PG: We are also anticipating differences between Toronto and Rijeka. There was some sort of fantasy happening here that seemed to be encouraged by both Althea and her costume director.

CM: I feel that this type of framing is very familiar in Althea's work...I have found myself thinking about questions of agency, pedagogy, and the fact that the project was being filmed. We don't see lights or other apparatuses. Her work raises those questions for the viewer and, as you were saying, she is very conscious of those structures. I wonder if it was an educational project or a therapeutic project we would question the role of those facilitating the kids' activities.

KS: Depending on the context I might. It just brings up the issue of the complexity of the organization of Musagetes who produces in depth community projects. There is a pedagogical aspect but the work was clearly made to be distributed and exported through the context of the contemporary art world.

KS: The work [as I see it] has also been edited to circulate outside of its context of production and that is why the context of the originating community primarily seemed to be a pedagogical gesture. Since it circulates it becomes more of an illustration of something that happened elsewhere. I am [prompted] to ask, ‘What’s being given to me to be seen? How am I being asked to relate to these stories or these people?’ And so, that’s why these questions of ‘What is visible?’ or ‘What is not visible?’ are unavoidable.

KJ: I was very aware of those questions in the film. The costumes were a kind of visual manifestation of them. You could see kid in them, but you could also see a contemporary hip fashion designer in them. Some of the girls had yellow face paint in a perfect line across their face – a kid wouldn't apply make up like that. Whereas other parts of their costumes were so wrong and off that a kid could come up with that kind of assembly. I see both an intervening hand and space for the kids' agency. At least, I hope so.

KS: ... I am asking what happens when I see these costumes? What is enacted by these costumes when in one moment they are playing machines and in another moment debating the concept of artists as workers, or debating the use of the museum versus the use of a factory that produces food and money for people?

PH: I guess a question might be: if something is produced by [an organization] that has goals, like the discussion of the possibility of this being a museum or cultural institution, and those aspects are tabled within the context of

theatre, does that limit it? Or, does that limit it as a work of art that opens up to other ideas? Doesn't any production have certain limitation depending on its distribution, its funders, economic constraints, and thematic content?

KS: To me, it is not so much about where the work is limited or inauthentic rather, it is more about the systems that exist around the work that I cannot help but respond to. For me, those aspects become just as much a part of the work... We are trying to parse meaning out of the work, and yet, what about the form or the editing? What about the installation, where are the moments of actually articulating these concerns? In very implicit, *not explicit*, ways Althea does this because she is very practiced in doing this in her work – a form which we now call social practice.

PG: Has there been any discussion about how the script or the spoken text was arrived at? I only know that the children were a part of the process. They brought their own ideas to it; presumably the editing was done later...

PH: In the credits there were sources of where some of the text came from like websites and press releases.

CM: There are levels [to the film and this conversation] that are entrapments – being that, certain relations or subjects carry more force and power in terms of the type of politics that they access than the potential that they offer. Like, at first, I was dubious about the use of children. Now, our focus is on the script. Or, the question of whether they chose their costumes. For me, these seem like very particular types of autonomy. Through this conversation I am starting to become more aware of broader frameworks for agency. In this kind of project, [Althea] has developed a matryoshka doll. She was accessing a very young generation who are both learning the role – fictitiously – of being labours and they seemed to have acknowledged this, but at the same time, they are also learning the role of being actors or temporary artists. They are becoming aware of these different forms of agency, frameworks, and roles of work and labour. They are dually becoming aware of what it means to be a labourer or a boss. At one point they were asked, “What is it like to work here?” and it seemed that they were becoming aware of performing or acting.

...

YL: Do you think it is significant that it was filmed in Rijeka, a former socialist country with a different economic system? The film is about the power of factories and workers. Why did the artist choose to go all that way?

PG: Musagetes chose the city and then they chose Althea [who chose the place] and went from there. Althea had to decide what to do with this place, this time, and this money... She took on these different circumstances like intervening layers of the before and after of the old political situation and the before and after of the building with a new generation.

YL: Looking at it that way is quite interesting. What is the next generation going to do now? Since their country has changed so much and are dealing with this transition... and with their parents, everybody's, anxiety. They are aware of the disuse of the factory and how their economy works. I don't really know but, I think [Croatian society] is struggling. When I was in Serbia, they were struggling with how to be within capitalism or neoliberalism and how things would work. I wonder how these questions echo [in the film].

KJ: There was an interesting scene with three boys and one of them is reading a text. One asks what activism is, what fascism is, and then it stops when they cannot define what communism is. Cut to next scene.

KS: I was a bit dubious about the nostalgia for certain ways of thinking about labour which do not really exist anymore. I began paying closer attention to the support materials, where Althea referred to the whole project as an occupation of the space. Reading this, the work becomes not a reclaiming of the space for factory labour and capitalism but rather a subtle gesture that could maintain some kind of workers' autonomy under the contemporary language of occupation.

ct: There is definitely some sort mythological history within the film that is constructed as being better than whatever the present moment of the film is. All of their propositions were trying to either reclaim or create a future that had something of the past that was not there at that moment – a sort of romanticism.

FrameWork 1/15

CM: Can you explain more specifically what you mean by nostalgia, nostalgia for labour relations that do not exist anymore?

KS: Just in terms of socialist or communist intentions of what factory labour was. In the film there was – I can't remember the exact language – it talked so much about how they worked happily and harder [and had] a kind of ownership and pride for the factory as a collective space...

ct: The workers were advocating on their own behalf to keep those jobs. For instance, in the first scene at the very beginning they were trying to continue working at the factory.

KS: There was obviously a radical juxtaposition [of the factory in this film] to something like the sweat shop version image of the factory that we have today. I thought that her insertion of the idea of the occupation in relation to labour practices was useful...there was a moment that was not entirely nostalgic but, where she was trying to assert some gesture towards a collective relationship to labour that could still be contemporary – a form of occupation as I understand it.

CM: Maybe an agency over the direction of what labour will develop into? I wonder about the scales of time and how it is rare that something so catastrophic happens where a whole society shifts from one way of being to a new way of being in a short period of time – all aspects of the society, not just one part. Could you imagine everything changing from political structures to industrial structures? One way around this is perhaps the reenactment or the revisiting of this haunted history as a way to give agency to people to work through these things. Theatre is often used as art therapy in different traumatic situations...I wonder if there was something similar happening here, where a chance was given to the younger generation to re-embody roles [of their ancestors], maybe not to become them, but to give them a sense of who they were while also offering other potentials.

KS: There is a slightly more cynical perspective: there have been multiple proposals to turn this space into a cultural centre and by virtue of [Althea's proposal, supported by] Musagetes, an international organization with money, coming in and performing that use of the space it became an economic gesture in that city. In those moments where I saw pedagogical or therapeutic potential, as a testimonial relationship to the kids learning their history and debating their history, it was very interesting to see, alongside, this other layer to the story which was also happening – which you can see by the architectural drawings* for the proposal to turn the factory into a cultural space.

* editor's note: Kim Simon is referring to drawings exhibited within the installation of support material for the project that Althea installed on the second floor of the gallery.

AA: It is interesting how art becomes a stand in for a political gesture that is slippery enough to never be held accountable. Like a play acting out politics which actually have a political impact to undermine [power structures]. These kids, who are benign, become a stand in for someone who is actually mouthing someone else. I watched an interview with Nan Goldin where she was asked why she photographs kids. She said that they are still the most alien beings that we know. The younger they are the less they are from Earth. They are actually being socialized to become human and that there is another coding they potentially have which is non-human. I just don't buy the simple explanation of kids as innocent. So for them to play roles... it is a funny slippage...there is a discomfort in this transition into adulthood, with these kids acting as adults ... They become these slippery stand-ins, like an art work.

KJ: The more we talk about this film the more I am convinced that Althea understood what she was doing. She has made this great muddy place where I am very aware of the kids saying, "Let's make it a museum but let's have a room for just fighting and a room just for stretchy turtlenecks." She lets these structures be, but she is also pulling at their threads really hard. It is a nice space of friction that allows all these questions to come up.

This is an edited text of a discussion that took place on January 10, 2015.