

Hovering above the shop floor

Paul de Bruyne, about Back Stages, 2018

One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. (Richard Sennett)

1. Initially, the Back Stages project tempts me to think about labour. This line of thought isn't odd or implausible. Back Stages shows twelve photo-compositions of shop floors all over the world. A small glass factory in the Chinese province of Fujian. A marble workshop in Carrara. A dance studio of the Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam. A bronze foundry in the Dutch province of Brabant. A tannery in Morocco. Just to name a few.

These are all places of labour. Predominantly heavy labour. Often unhealthy, sometimes dangerous and, outside Europe, certain to be terribly underpaid as well. Such unionistic tendencies are not the first thing to surface though, looking at the compositions. Presenting itself instead is a pleasant, warm sentiment. An invitation to participate in an exchange about labour. Followed by questions about good, desirable labour. Eventually leading to questions about craft and artistic labour.

The twelve photo-compositions that together make up Back Stages clearly form a unity. They have been created with a steady, experienced hand, they are the result of adhering to a strict work ethic and method that are solidly grounded in a consistent aesthetical and ethical universe. Clear, not confused. Pleasant, not tormented. Complex, not obvious. Compassionate, not sneaky or malicious. Generous rather than cynical.

I call the works photo-compositions, photo-paintings or photo-performances, because the artists take the montage of various photographic elements as the guiding principle in creating the images. The artists' unwavering focus creates a sound idea of what constitutes labour in their universe. The unique production sites and their inhabitants, no matter where they are, belong together. Whether they are glass-blowers, archaeologists, stonemasons, museum visitors or artists. They are members of the same guild. A world with universally applicable basic values for labour.

The representation of labour created by Korfmann and Pfeifer shows a collectivity in action. Here, people produce in groups, not in masses and not as individuals. It's a production that is neither Fordist nor post-Fordist. No assembly-line labour in immeasurable halls, but no hyper-flexible individualised task performed at the kitchen table or during a metro ride either. These groups are small, the size of a sports team. The workers demonstrate the basic attitude of their labour, their basic Gestus, to employ a Brechtian term, that embodies the artisanal, psychological and sociological necessities of a profession or social role. Or they move around the floor from one place to another. Their lines of direction seem to be clear and deliberate and are meant to support the work of the labourers who are using their attributes to mix the raw materials.

Still, the viewer will need an attentive eye to discern the labour collective in action. A first glance at these photo-paintings doesn't identify the labourers as the main characters but the shop floor instead. The labourers are concealed in a landscape with an uneven floor that is littered with tools, electrical wires, kilns, tubs, cloths, half-finished or final products. All the equipment needed to arrive from the raw materials to the products that are made in the workshops.

The shop floor imposes itself, massive and monochrome in its roughness, its vulnerability and historicity. Most of these floors have been in use for a long time. They seem to be drenched in the sweat, blood and tears of previous generations. It is noteworthy that the floors in the artists' studios are least inclined to step into the limelight. There, it's the artists who draw the attention to themselves or their equipment. In any case, the floor is always a canvas for a landscape in which labour unfolds. In which labour leaves its traces.

No matter how concealed the labourers seem to be at first, they can still be recognised as socialised individualities. Only in a split second perhaps, at the edge of the scene, or buried deep down in a detail, but still, as individual people. You see a sweat stain on a man's T-shirt and you start thinking of the way he smells, you wonder how he washes his clothes or if someone does it for him, you think about his wages, his children, his family. A woman bronze founder is a reminder that this project shows mainly male labourers. (Hold on for a second. Is that actually true? Fact-checking with the artists learns that the number of men and women hidden under the hats in the Chinese glass workshop is roughly the same and that the Chinese granite workshops traditionally employ a lot of women.) But still. Does the female bronze founder do the same work as her male colleagues? Does she receive equal wages? Someone is wearing a football shirt with number 12, in the fresh blue colour of Manchester City. Would he be a fan, or did he buy or get it for no particular reason? Or could there be a Portuguese team (since the text on the shirt is in Portuguese) that sports the same blue outfit as Man City?

The labour processes in Back Stages share a fierce intensity. No matter how dishevelled, even dangerous some of the work spaces appear to be, you never feel as if anyone here is wasting time or money. The space, the people and the

materials have a way of finding each other in an intense encounter. The necessity of the work process is prominent. There is not a single trace of carefree idleness.

This intensity in itself implies an exceptional intimacy as well. The space, the materials, the attributes and the people in the compositions belong together, as if they were a family. No one and nothing can do without the other. The intimacy is not only interactional between the labourers, but even more clearly between labourers, space, tools and attributes. Nothing exists outside the work plan, everyone seems to be responsible for it. They are Latourian network worlds, or Buddhist everything-is-connected-to-everything-else realities if you like.

The intimacies on these shop floors are of a particularly physical nature. Palpable. Smellable. Audible. After all, we are dealing with artisanal work here. It's intimate, physical labour that allows for secret knowledge to be shared. From body to body. From hand to hand. Each part in the process implies and involves the other roles. Acting together they create the oeuvre. The work.

My interpretation of Back Stages is provoked by the way the photo-performances are framed. They are not images from large factories but from small (family) businesses or artistic production companies. These small businesses are undoubtedly part of larger and more complex networks of acquisition, product development, presentation, PR, distribution and sales, but the image you are looking at reveals a closed, spatially confined, unisonant community. A theatrical scene staged by the artists with the frame of the photo-composition erected around it like a proscenium arch.

Back Stages creates images of collective, intense, intimate, familial, knowledge-sharing and knowledge-generating, strictly delineated spaces, where work is produced in an artisanal fashion.

Would this be the hallmark of good, desirable labour? The question arises from the pleasant feeling, the tranquillity and the invitation to a dialogical vision that I experienced when I first encountered the photo-compositions. The smile they provoked. The friendliness. A perfume of spirituality... Would it have been Korfmann and Pfeifer's intention to paint a utopian picture of labour? A way out of the torture pit of work relations that lead to our collective depressions and burn-outs?

That question inevitably engenders a wider political and societal reasoning.

2. No, Back Stages doesn't paint a picture of utopian labour conditions or ideal labour. The dust is far too visible, the noise is turned up too loud, the tools and the debris are scattered across the floor too carelessly, the kilns are too near and too hot. Certainly at the Chinese sites. That doesn't mean the compositions would be void of societal comments.

At a closer look it becomes clear that Back Stages refrains from the political-cultural wars, waged all over the world for two decennia now, that are characterised by an anger that seems to be growing darker every day.

The current society seems to be coming apart at the seams. Consensus is crumbling, on any conceivable issue. Migration, distribution of wealth, the weather, god, the water, the arts, biodiversity, God, Black Peter and Saint Nicholas, democracy, museums, the neighbour's dress, enlightened despotism, dark despotism, lust, feminism, love, masculinity, modernism, obscurantism. Yeats is being dusted off: 'things fall apart. The centre cannot hold'.

Polarisation and fragmentation lead to cynicism in the cultural elite, an impossibility to see a brighter future, an inability to imagine a social alternative beyond the tendency to hold on even tighter to established privileges. In the margins, subcultures are roaming about, entangled in a contest of radicalisms and extremisms. In a frontal assault on the Enlightenment's assumption of equality, for instance, or in a docile submission to political, ecological, economical prerogatives. A call for immediate action and a conspicuous symbolism to improve the world in any direction whatsoever. For agitation and propaganda, really. For the production of lies.

That is not the feeling I get from Back Stages.

Back Stages evokes a societal space averse from cynicism, the smell of vomit, teargas and urine in the societal dead-end street, from aggressive populism and the fanatical belief in malleability and redemption. A space founded on values of sharing, common ownership and social cooperation.

The shop floors composed in the photo-paintings reveal relationships between people, objects, materials and spaces that speak of a certain ease of cooperation. That show mutual trust and, above all, suggest the actual production of actual products, instead of soap bubbles. A Richard Sennett-like sense of craftsmanship.

The work of Korfmann and Pfeifer opens a gate, it articulates a desire for common property and common activity. For common good. For labour that leads to solidarity. Where words like home and homemade come together. Where a small, intimate choreography emerges from the common work process.

In their project, Korfmann and Pfeifer leave behind all the cynicism, the extremism and the incorporeality of contemporary cultural labour and art. It's not necessarily a conscious act of defiance, before anything it is an artistic gesture. It is a dream deed that doesn't revolt but takes documentation as a point of departure to create imaginative impressions. It is fiction.

The project's title, *Back Stages*, refers to the theatre. The grand dream machine. It is a pertinent choice. In the theatre, the reality of acting and the theatre's architecture converge with free imagination. The same happens in the photo-compositions that make up this project. The artists are directors, developing an actual utopian visual experience from their observations of reality.

But what kind of directing tricks do Korfmann and Pfeifer actually use to take this often underpaid, extremely demanding, sometimes unhealthy labour and turn it into a platform of reflection on good labour? And why are they so interested in making photo-paintings of places of labour to begin with?

3. Let's start at the beginning, the cornerstone of Korfmann's language: the top-down perspective of the photographic images. The photos were taken straight from above the shop floor. Hidden from the spectator's eye, dozens of photographs of the floor are then merged into one image in a complex work of composition.

The top-down perspective is easier to experience than to analyse though. What actually is top-down? What does it do?

'Bird's eye view' is the term most often used in the analysis of Korfmann's work. Or a drone view, a helicopter view. But you might just as well call it the view of the omniscient narrator, the scientific view or God's view.

The bird's eye view stresses the freedom of vision in respect to what is being seen. The bird liberates itself from all the swarming down below. Unless it is a raptor with eyes prying for fair game that soon, in one swoop, will become captured prey. Eventually, neither option seems to apply to the central perspective of *Back Stages*, which emphatically engages with the shop floor it portrays and certainly has no detached or murderous relation to it.

The metaphor of the drone or the helicopter brings along a connotation of power and control. It can't be a coincidence that the photographs on which the compositions have been based were not made with a drone but with the camera mounted on a long old-fashioned pole. Old-fashioned craftsmanship is inherent to the project. For certain, *Back Stages* doesn't speak of ascendancy. Even when you listen very closely, you won't hear the annoying thump of the drone motor anywhere in the picture. The artists' view is one that lives in silence and meditation. This view doesn't exert control, it enjoys its vacancy instead.

There is no omniscient narrator either: this view knows little and wonders about many things. It lets the story tell itself rather than to direct it from the outside. Nor is it a scientific view. It doesn't want to seek or find an objective, underlying truth. God's view? No way. In the end, God will always be a judging machine. Who may or may not enter the heavens? Here, propositions about good and evil are entirely absent. There is no judgement, and certainly no sentence.

But what kind of view is it then? It is a patient, compassionate human view. Not focused on plunder, control, power or judgment but on mutual encounter.

It is a view that – and I'm taking a rather intuitive and speculative leap here – is being directed from below. It's the floor that invites the artists to approach and then to take some distance again. It is a view that zooms in and out. The view seems to be part of a body carried by the up-draught, rising warm air pockets. A free gliding, airborne view. A view hovering above the shop floor.

I could take a more technical approach to the problematic miracle of the view. If I correctly observe my own visual experience of the works in *Back Stages*, I can discern four different visual movements from the perspective of the audience. There is the top-down line of sight, following the selection of the directors. From that side the photo-painting looks three-dimensional. There is a clear distance to the shop floor scenery and the labourers. The spectator's view is zooming in and out along this vertical axis. In the gallery, however, the audience also looks at the artwork at eye level. Here, the view is confronted with a two-dimensional canvas, an abstract colour painting. This, in turn, can be scanned up-close or observed in its entirety. It's a surface investigation of a flat world. I think that a combination of these directions of view forms the basis for the visual experience of the audience.

The artists select a landscape to explore. The scene of artisanal labour. They construct an artistic position of a free-floating body that communicates with the scenery. The viewer then actively engages with the resulting images.

The interplay of the artist and the audience brings about a playfulness that lays the foundation for the mellow, pleasant feeling evoked by looking at this work. It has something childlike and game-like to it. 'Now you see Freud's head, now you perceive the brow and the nose as a naked woman.' 'By the way, where is Wally? Well, hidden somewhere in this jumble of figures and colours.' Now you see a colour painting. But now, suddenly, you see a supporter of a football team. Und

kein Ende. Viewing and gaming pleasure assured.

Korfmann and Pfeifer's imagination is like a dance. A nimble choreography is operating in the compositions. With an up-tempo beat (and—forgive me the expression—a lot of synths) in a site-specific environment: that of the artisanal shop floor.

That concludes the most important arsenal of directing in this project. A freely hovering point of view, a strategy to actively involve the audience, a nimble, up-tempo, dancing composition technique.

Is the initial journey, from labour to desirable labour to the craftsmanship of art, invalidated or made redundant by this train of thought? I don't think so.

By composing images based on documentary material, the Back Stages project shows a close affinity between the production of art and early industrial manufacturing processes. To the extent that labour is collective, intense, intimate and knowledge-sharing, it can be good labour. Labour conditions, that is, where the free imagination of the artist can get to work and invite the viewer to actively participate in the creation of meaning.

To what end do Korfmann and Pfeifer deploy their arsenal? Why did they conceive and elaborate this project?

Ultimately, Back Stages is a self-questioning of the artists. What is our work? What is our place in society?

Unsurprisingly, Korfmann and Pfeifer arrive at the implicit assumption that artistic practice has the potential to become a model for good labour. Labour that, at the very least, can annotate the degradation of the labour culture in our societies. With thoughtful lightness, Korfmann and Pfeifer produce beautiful photo-paintings of labour in our days.

4. Short epilogue. Two photo-compositions from the Back Stages series— science museum Teylers and the collectors fair – distance themselves from the production floor, towards the hall where consumers, more numerous and mobile than the labourers on the shop floor, are in command.

It is a movement away from the back stage, the studio and the rehearsal room, to the front stage. The front stage is the world of educational and financial values. The world that back stages and production places can't escape from, except in the procedure of creating them. Showing the front stages makes it abundantly clear that the Back Stages project has the ambience of the work in a rehearsal room. The doors are still closed for the other actors in the work field. Meaning is still emerging, the critics are far away, the labourers are not artists yet. The work remains autonomous. Just for a little while. And then real life comes peeping round the corner.