



Figure 1: Jorge Ribalta, Anonymous Work (2005), installation detail of the 'Field Works' exhibition at the gallery Angels, Barcelona, 2013.

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Between Labour and Intellect: Jorge Ribalta's *Anonymous Work*

The selection of photographs making up Jorge Ribalta's *Anonymous Work* (2005) address a question at the centre of our histories of modernism: how do you represent labour? Do you represent the labourer, men and women at work, as Lewis Hine did in his work portraits of the 1920s? Or do you eschew the labouring body, the modernist integration of man and machine, like Albert Renger-Patzsch, for close-up shots of industrial spaces and workbenches? (Benjamin 1979; Buchloh 1995). In *Anonymous Work*, Ribalta has settled on both frames of reference – and for neither. These medium-format photographs of machinists and their tools – shiny drill bits, crafted nuts, bolts and hammers – shuttle between figure and ground, between the figure of the worker and the ground of work. In doing so, *Anonymous Work* works against the grain. It calls attention to the labour of

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photography. For Ribalta, work is not an activity that can be contained *in* the photograph. It emerges between frames and as a problem of representation.

Shot in the summer of 2005, *Anonymous Work* recalls the icons of modernism – the sheen of new industrial forms, both mass produced and sculptural. We are reminded of the lustre of Constantin Brancusi’s organic shapes as much as the stock photographs of Henry Ford’s motor factory. Yet, if the ground of representation for *Anonymous Work* is international modernism, its framing is wholly local and site specific. Ribalta shot these photographs inside Barcelona’s Can Ricart textile factory. Opened in 1853, in Poble Nou, Can Ricart is one of Barcelona’s oldest industrial spaces. The brick and mortar chimney rising above the factory’s elongated blocks is albeit now far more reminiscent of museum spaces like Tate Modern than a nineteenth-century palace of industrialization. Barcelona’s Can Ricart did not go the way of London’s ‘museum-as-social factory’, to borrow a phrase from Hito Steyerl (2009). In the summer of 2005, the heterogeneous constellation of workshops (including, metal, glass, wax and chemical industries) housed at Can Ricart was in the process of being decommissioned, and the building designated a historic site and the hub of 22@bcn, Barcelona’s new technology district (see: <http://www.22barcelona.com/content/blogcategory/49/280/lang,en/>). The redevelopment of Poble Nou and Can Ricart is part of what economists have come to refer to as the ‘Spanish Miracle’, the wild economic speculation of the 1990s that resulted in the reintegration of Barcelona’s once industrial periphery into the European centre. This speculation and privatization also resulted in widespread evictions, unemployment and Spain’s current dependency on European financial capital (Navarro 2012).

For Ribalta to turn – or return – to the iconography of labour might seem a bit out of place and nostalgic. After all, as many have queried, has the emergence of a post-industrial and post-working class society made the iconography of labour illegible and outmoded? Yet to read *Anonymous Work* in accordance with this history is to accept the logic of our post-histories (post-human, post-documentary, postmodern). It is also to assume that Can Ricart is an icon of global processes of privatization, representative of the trajectory of international modernism and what we have come to call post-Fordism. It is not. The redevelopment of this section of Barcelona’s industrial periphery into a publically owned but privately managed ‘knowledge’ centre narrates a very local and modern history. It began with Francisco Franco in the 1950s, not with the **rise** of neo-liberalism in the 1990s. The Spanish government’s 1998 Land Act, more commonly known as the ‘build anywhere law’, accelerated processes of privatization that began under Franco’s Minister of Housing, the Falangist José Luis Arrese. In 1957, Arrese famously proclaimed: *Queremos un país de propietarios, no de proletarios* – ‘we want a country of proprietors, not proletarians’ (López and Rodríguez 2011). ‘Thatcherism *avant la lettre*,’ Arrese’s privatization push freed up of important plots of land, including the Plan de la Ribera in the 1960s and the Olympic Village in the 1980s, and with the run up to the 1992 Barcelona Games it drove the ‘Spanish bull’ to miraculously outperform the ‘lions’ of Old Europe. (López and Rodríguez 2011: 5).¹ Spain’s performance, as numerous photographs of street

1. López and Rodríguez, 5–6.

2. On the local campaign 'Salvem Can Ricart,' see <http://salvemcanricart.blogspot.co.uk/>. Many have associated the M15 Movement with the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring uprisings. See, for example, Danny Schechter, 'In Spain's Tahrir Square: The Revolution Struggles to be Born,' <https://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/06/17-2>, accessed 20 February 2013.
3. López and Rodríguez, 26.

demonstrations circulating in the local press and on the Internet remind us, did not last long. When the financial bubble burst in Spain – and everywhere else – in 2008, Spain's **working class** had already made numerous attempts to claw back public space. Coincident with global campaigns against the World Bank, the EU Summit and the Iraq War, tens of thousands of young men and women took to the streets, galvanising social movements, including a local campaign to save Can Ricart, 'Salvem Can Ricart,' and the heterogeneous M15 (May 15) or Indignants Movement, which exploded in the run up the May 2011 regional election.² Perhaps not surprisingly, in the face of staggering unemployment and evictions, those on the streets in May 2011 directly responded to the old slogan. They shouted 'No house, no job, no pension – no fear!'³

Ribalta's **decision in Can Ricart** just days before the factory closed its doors could be considered melancholic. *Anonymous Work* memorializes modes of industrial work and sites of production that were about to disappear. Yet, Ribalta's series is not an act of mourning. What emerges in *Anonymous Work* is not *the* past; it is the process of producing the past – or the labour of photography. Think Eugène Atget's vast archive of Paris shop windows produced in the first decade of the twentieth century and Walker Evans's 1955 *Fortune* portfolio 'Beauties of the Common Tool'. For photography, and modernism, loss is not ontological; it is historical. It is produced through representation. Ribalta's engagement with photography as history is most evident in the two photographs in *Anonymous Work* of men at machines. Shot with a **hand-held Rolleiflex, an appropriately outmoded technology**, **these photographs are reminiscent of some of the** first work photographs: Étienne Jules Marey's motion studies. The actions of the workers in the Can Ricart factory are similarly blurred and abstracted. Labour is not made iconic; it is stripped down and, like Marey's chronophotographs, mediated as graphic signs. Ribalta's studies of men working are not portraits. Nor are they documents of militant dehumanization. They are, like the close-up shots of workbenches, bolts and hammers, details. Significantly, Ribalta shot *Anonymous Work* in the 'verification room', the space in the factory where divided labour is homogenized and piecemeal work is naturalized and made whole.

Ribalta's concern with details is poignant. This is not because as our histories of modernism like to remind us the labouring body is in the process of disappearing and becoming anonymous. It is because detail work is at the heart of processes of modernization and industrialization. Industrialization is not, as we are lead to believe, synonymous with the invention of new technologies like the 'knowledge systems' populating Poblenu. It is synonymous with the reorganization of very old working methods and the traditional ways in which people laboured.⁴ To quote Karl Marx from his discussion of the division of labour and manufacture: 'the manufacturing period simplifies, improves, and multiplies the implements of labour, by adapting them to the exclusively special function of each detail labourer' (1971: 323). The detail labourer, though, is not simply the worker in the picture; it is also the photographer. As Allan Sekula noted in his seminal study of the history of photography as a history

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of new means for organizing labour and capital, 'Photographers are detail workers when they are not artists or leisure-time amateurs, and thus it is not unreasonable ... to label photographers "the proletarians of creation"' (1983: 194).^f Ribalta reactivates modernism's history, he does so without a postmodern parody. *Anonymous Work* addresses the relationship between work and its photographic representation – in the photograph and through new professions, like the photographer.

Working is never simply represented in Ribalta's photographs. It is played out, as Sekula suggests, in the ways in which photography becomes a pastime, a job and a profession. Thus, it is no surprise that the photographer's work is the subject of another series of photographs Ribalta began while working inside Can Ricart: *On the Grass*. Certainly a reference to that most modern of images – Édouard Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* – this series of over 100 photographs of men and women at leisure was produced at *Sónar*, the International Festival of Advanced Music and Multimedia Art in Barcelona. Locally considered one of the most important cultural enterprises and an example of new technocratic cultural governance geared to tourism and the privatization of pleasure, *Sónar* is part and parcel of the industrial Barcelona's programmatic gentrification.⁴ Ribalta visited the festival four years in a row, recording leisure activities on the same day each year. *On the Grass* is an anthropological study of youth culture, leisure and work. If these photographs record young men and women gathered in public spaces, they also represent public gathering as a new site of work. The subjects work with and for the camera – their cameras and Ribalta's. They record, they pose and they look. They incorporate the work of the screen and the now omnipresent gaze of the camera's surveillant eye into their leisure activities. *On the Grass* is arguably a companion to *Anonymous Work*. Together they engage the transformation of work from the factory to 'the fringes,' in which, as Paolo Virno has argued in his reading of Marx's discussion of 'general intellect,' 'Disposable time, a potential wealth, is manifested as poverty: forced redundancy, early retirement, structural unemployment and the proliferation of hierarchies.'⁵ Less a dialectical play between past and present, Fordism and post-Fordism, *Anonymous Work* and *On the Grass* play out contemporary debates about the relationship between technology and democracy – the problematic of self-representation – as well as the dissolution of the boundary between public and private space that was being fought over on the periphery for the last decade.

The activities referenced in Ribalta's photographs are not limited to the proliferation of photographic cultures in the last ten years. For example, Ribalta's work at Can Ricart exceeded the making of the photographs. Between 2005 and 2008, his professional roles proliferated: photographer, community activist and curator, and liaison between the public and Barcelona's first contemporary art institution, Museu d'Art Contemporani Barcelona (MACBA).⁶ In conjunction with his decision to record the last days of work inside the factory, Ribalta produced two other works. On 11 June 2005, he organized a one-day exhibition of the work of local photographers in one of Can Ricart's abandoned chemical workshops. Documenting the factory, the neighbourhood, evictions, empty workstations and community resistance, the exhibition was part of the local campaign 'Salvem Can

4. Jorge Ribalta, email with author, 1 March 2013. See as well Ribalta's discussion of neoliberal 'managed' culture in his, 'Experiments in New Institutionalities,' at <http://www.macba.cat/ca/textos-publicacions>, accessed 2 March 2013.
5. Paolo Virno, 'General Intellect,' at <http://generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm>, accessed 2 March 2013.
6. MACBA opened to the public in 1995, and Ribalta was the Head of Public Programs from 1999–2009.

7. Ribalta, 'Experiments in New Institutionalism', 1.



Ricart's 'Save Can Ricart' (Swartz 2008). The campaign organized the demands of over 40 cultural, neighbourhood and youth groups and called for the historic preservation of the site and alternative planning models. Collective pressure produced results on both fronts. The new building plans for the site respect the old distribution and proportions and will include a community centre and expanded art and cultural spaces (Martí-Costa and Bonet-Martí 2009: 127). Perhaps, as the anthropologist Isaac Morrero Guillamon has suggested, the enemy facing the 'Spanish bull' is not urbanization or capital. It is the refusal of collective action and participatory decision-making (2010).

Several of the photographs on view at Can Ricart were also part of 'Universal Archive: The Condition of the Document and the Modern Photographic Utopia', an exhibition Ribalta curated for the MACBA in 2008. The city's contemporary transformation framed the exhibition, which developed in conjunction with various projects at MACBA designed to negotiate, as Ribalta put it, a 'credible model of the art institution in a country like Spain, where these institutions had not evolved at an international pace and still today share the public discredit of a state with endemic democratic shortcomings.'⁷ 'Universal Archive' engages this process through the consideration of 'minor' and local practices, as well as through forms of exhibition display highlighting collective social processes and public artistic spheres. Recognizing the intersection of documentary, new means of mass culture, from exhibition design to the illustrated press, and art, the exhibition carefully re-scripted – and localized – our histories of modernism. In doing so, 'Universal Archive' reversed the logic of mourning. Ribalta's history of documentary photography sought to respond to contemporary claims that the emergence of digital technologies sounded the death knell of photographic realism and the precondition for the documentary potential of photography. Does photoshop and digitalization, he asked, necessarily liquidate photographic realism and the photograph's indexical quality? Or is this model of realism a convenient myth easily undone if we dispense with the claim that documentary is not contingent and separable from mass culture and artistic practice? As Ribalta explained in the guidebook produced to accompany the exhibition: if we dispense with the mythology that documentary aims to record truth, as opposed to the ways in which technologies were used to record and produce new political imaginaries, can we really hold on to the fear that truth is no longer legible in our digital era? (Ribalta 2008). Is this crisis, like the fiscal crisis, nothing new? Is it not part and parcel of the historical arc of modernism and utopia made legible by our photographic cultures?

Anonymous work poses these questions. It asks us to rethink the history of documentary work against our standard histories of modernism. If we have entered a phase of the re-emergence of documentary *now*, as many historians of photography have suggested, this is not because the documentary of the past – Hine's *Men at Work* and Evans's aesthetic portraits of Alabama tenant farmers – confused ontology and history. It is not because we need a new documentary tradition. The reinvention of documentary in the midst of political crisis and new photographic cultures must not rebuff the past. It must, following the labour of photography, rewrite it (Ribalta 2012). In *Anonymous*



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Work, Ribalta neither rejects nor returns to modernist icons. He works with them in order to reinvestigate the adequacy of the binary shaping our modernist modes of the representation of labour: fetishization and forgetting. In turn, *Anonymous Work* is a tribute – but not to the labourer. It is a tribute to unrecognized virtuosity, to the general intellect that does not correspond with the conditions imposed by the myths of modernism, the author and the work of art.

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