The Breathing Factory: Locating the global labouring body

Mark Curran *Dublin Institute of Technology*

Abstract

In 2005, the Republic of Ireland was defined as the 'most globalised economy in the world' (IDA Ireland). The significance of this position is amplified by the fact that the South of Ireland never experienced an Industrial Revolution compared to other western European countries (O'Brien 1999). In the absence of significant audio and visual representation of labour, global labour practices and globalised industrial space in the context of this accelerated economic development, this study, both in its methodological design and implementation, stakes out new terrain through the combined use of photography, digital video and ethnographic methods, further engaging with the oral testimony of workers in the multinational location/fieldsite of Hewlett-Packard Manufacturing and Technology Campus, Leixlip, County Kildare. This article addresses the rationale for the multivocal framework in which this practice-led research project has been methodologically undertaken and its role in the formation of the installation, The Breathing Factory *(2006).*

Keywords

lens-based research
global labour practices
montage/multivocality
reflexivity
installation
ethnography

I

> The bus finally arrived. The stop was directly in front of the plant. I had tripod bag over one shoulder, camera and recording equipment over the other. The buses came about once an hour. Everyone knew the schedule due to their rare appearance. Most people drove. There were about twenty of us. I had listened to conversations in French, Italian, Spanish and English, spoken between individuals with different 'mother tongues'. It was twenty past four in the afternoon after a productive day. I spoke to the driver while he had a cigarette before we departed. He was from Pakistan but had resided in Canada not far from where I had once lived. The winters, he said, were better in Ireland. I struggled onto the bus, got a seat upstairs and began writing. That day, I had clearance to photograph the exterior of the Hewlett Packard plant. Where to begin? (fieldnote, Thursday, 22 April, Leixlip, Ireland).

In 1931, Bertolt Brecht famously remarked to his close friend Walter Benjamin, '[L]ess then ever does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works . . . tells us nothing about the conditions and relations within' (Benjamin [1931] 1979: 255). The images (Figure 1) are displayed in eleven fragmented rooftop perspectives. Commissioned by the German company for the World Fair in Paris in 1867, all is in focus with a large depth of field – an expanded view
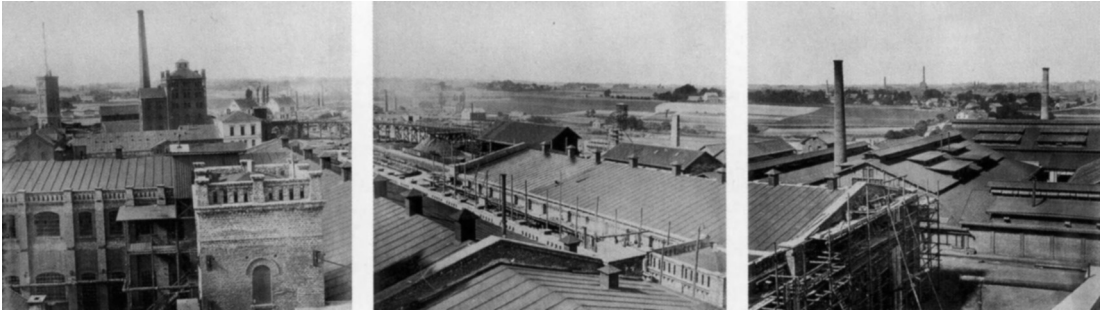
Figure 1: 'Krupp'sche Guflstahlfabrik/innere Ansicht, 1865' (detail of 3) 180° – Panorama, b/w photographs, Hugo van Werden (courtesy Historisches Archiv Krupp, Essen).

1 The title, *The Breathing Factory*, is inspired by the economic management system advocated by Peter Hartz, former CEO of Volkswagen. This system, perpetually responding to the demands of the global market, is envisaged as spreading beyond the factory floor: '[The] new "breathing rhythm" must also make headway at the social level: the time rhythm in society, the labour market, the educational system and the remaining institutions of the welfare state. The target is a "breathing factory"' (Hartz 1996: 73). See Curran (2006) for photographs of Hewlett Packard, Leixlip and portraits of workers and their testimonies.

2 The word 'evoke' here references the notion of 'evocation', developed by Tyler (1989) in his discussion of postmodern ethnography.

3 For a discussion of the globalised workplace and its practices in Ireland, see, for example, O'Riain (2000).

of the factory complex stretching out towards the evaporating landscape beyond, barely rural. These iconic images by Hugo van Werden are imbued with the idealistic optimism of industrialisation; here one stands, located within and among the industrialised watchtowers surveying the kingdom below and all it promises. Brecht was correct in that the images convey little of the 'conditions' of labour within. However, I argue they signify not only the actuality of industrial relations and industrialisation itself, but further implicate the role of the visual, then and now, in the construction of how labour conditions are represented.

In the shadow of Brecht's statement, I reflect on the methodological framework in which my lens-based MPhil research project has been undertaken and its relationship to the formation of the resulting installation, *The Breathing Factory.*[1] In this framework of 'montage' (Marcus 1995) or 'multivocality' (Pink 2001) I deploy audiovisual ethnographic representational practices, underscoring the potential for the generation of non-hierarchical and multilinear texts – designed to 'evoke'[2] a narrative that is read, viewed, heard and experienced. I make reference to the ethnographic notion of 'reflexivity' – an implicit prerequisite for such a framework and its manifestation in the form of field diaries, further addressing the relationship between the photographic and digital video work produced, both of which formed core elements in the montaged exhibition of my ethnographic material. The collation of testimonies in the form of interviews with workers at the Hewlett Packard (HP) site, Leixlip, were further incorporated into the conceptual design of the installation. Thematically, the research critically engaged with the role and representation of both labour and global labour practices, together with the ephemeral and fleeting nature of globalised industrial space in the context of Ireland's recent accelerated economic development.[3] 'We are encouraged to believe', as Allan Sekula contends, 'that we live in a "post-industrial" age, when in fact the industrial function has just been "globalised"' (2001: 27). Significantly, Ireland's current status as the 'most globalised economy in the world' (IDA Ireland 2005) has been brought about through processes of globalisation and the migration of global capital during the past decade. The focus for the study, therefore, has been the industrialised multinational location of the Hewlett-Packard Manufacturing and Technology Campus in the east of Ireland – one of only three such 'global sites of operation'.
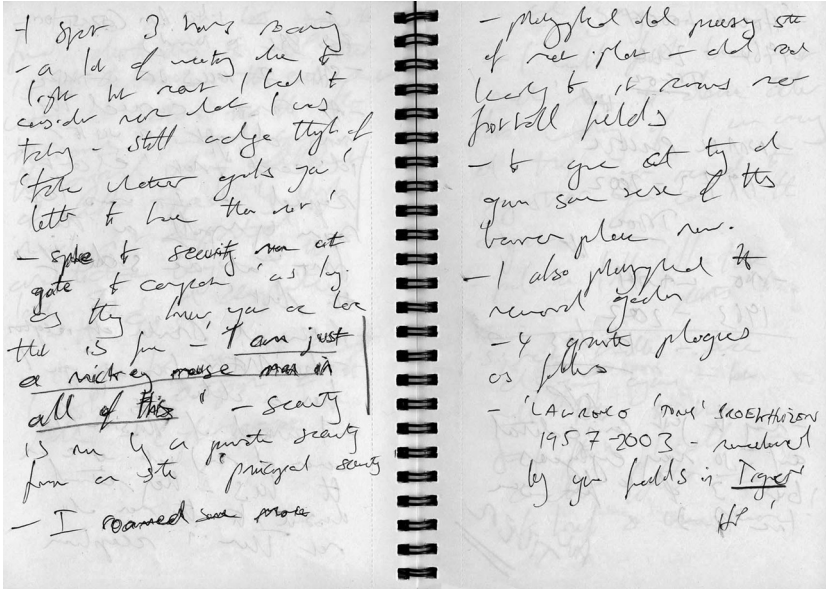
Mark Curran

Figure 2: Pages from diary, June 2003.

4   Fieldnotes were divided up into observational, theoretical and methodological headings, as advocated by Schatzman and Strauss (1973).

The cultural theorist, Mieke Bal, writes: '[A]s a social discipline that . . . emerged out of a political practice no longer acceptable – that of imperialism and colonialism – anthropology is today the most self-critical discipline' (1996: 201). Ethnography, as an anthropological method of qualitative research, has addressed this critical history in acknowledging and fore-grounding the subject position of the researcher in the implementation and textual representation of the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). A core element of reflexive ethnographic inquiry and its documentation converges upon the rigorous and structured maintenance of research field diaries (Figure 2). Darren Newbury, for example, has provided a critical review of the application of the 'field-diary' in the context of research in the field of art and design practice, advocating the use of the diary as a central component of visual media practice, constituting for the researcher a necessary 'ongoing, developmental dialogue' and a 'vehicle for ordered creativity' (2001: 2–5).

In the context of late-modern critiques concerning the role of photography both in the representation and perpetuation of ideological practices, 'reflexivity', I argue, performs a significant function in documentary photographic practice as a research method – rendering explicit that which is implicit. Therefore, diaries displayed in the *The Breathing Factory* were used from the very outset of my research; they followed formulated headings[4] detailing all contact and communication related to the project, extending through the production and postproduction phases where, for example, the process of image editing was documented in and of itself (Figure 3).

Hammersley and Atkinson acknowledge the capacity of research diaries 'to evoke the times and places of the field', and call to mind the sights, sounds, and smells of 'elsewhere' (1995: 176). During the course of my
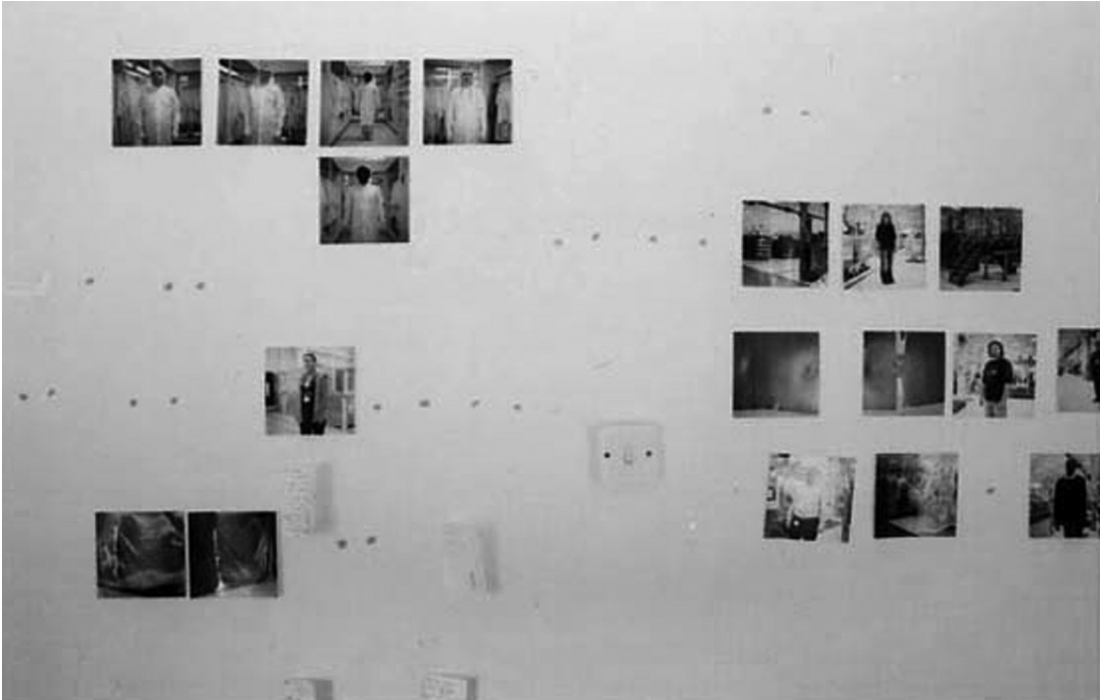
Figure 3: Workroom, Dublin, January 2004.

5   From seminar on thematic of 'Space and Place', Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, Dublin Institute of Technology (March 18 2004).

research practice it became apparent that the use of diaries – these imprints on paper – were significant in their own right, excerpts of which would ultimately form part of the final installation; their inclusion providing a necessary reflexive outcome of the methodological framework adopted. In her engagement with questions of visual ethnographic representation, Sarah Pink challenges viewing qualitative research as 'a linear narrative that represents the research experience as one in which ethnographers go to "the field," get the "data" and then go "home" to analyse and "write it up"' (2001: 117). She continues to argue that 'reality is, in fact, continuous and subjectively experienced . . . at best ethnographers can only reconstruct fragments of a subjective experience of reality . . . [Representations] of knowledge are never complete (2001: 167). Such a position is further echoed by cultural anthropologist Allen Feldman, who maintains that 'a full record is a myth; what one achieves is in fact a fractured narrative'.[5] Pink, following Marcus, thus advocates an ethnographic text constructed according to the principle of 'montage' or 'multivocality' – 'representations that incorporate the multilinearity of research and everyday lives' (2001: 117). However, she warns of the methodological challenges of such a framing, especially in the problematical sphere of media representation, since ethnographic audiovisual practices designed to give subjects a voice may, in the end, 'only constitute a new textual construction in which the narrative of the ethnographer [or photographer] is just as dominant and those of the subjects subordinate' (2001:118). Consequently, Pink argues for a rigorous reflexive approach,

Mark Curran

acknowledging that the researcher's subjectivity is a central ingredient in the conceptualisation, production and representation of the research process. As Sekula has argued and relevant to my reflexive practice-based research, 'a truly critical social documentary will frame the crime, the trial and the system of justice and its official myths' (1978: 122).

II

The photographer Hugo Van Werden had positioned himself among the rooftops and pointed his camera to make images of the Krupp factory works (Figure 1). In his discussion of pointing and photography's power of ostension, John Roberts notes that '[to] point at things . . . [photography is] the ostensive medium par excellence . . . and pointing contributes to our knowledge of the world' (1997: 28). However, pointing and meaning is not the same thing and Roberts argues for a 'theoretically self-conscious practice' enabling 'the photographic document [to be] not so much an inert nomination of things in the world, but a source of inferential complexity' (1997: 9, 29). Roberts further references the gesture as does Joanna Lowry, who views the 'act of photography itself as a moment of authentication' (2002: 50).

The discarded robes of previous shifts remain suspended (Figure 4). Will those bodies return? Floating and waiting upon the willing and able,

Figure 4: 'Gowning Room, Building 7, 11.02 a.m., Monday, 10 November 2003' (Leixlip, Ireland). Ultrachome Print.
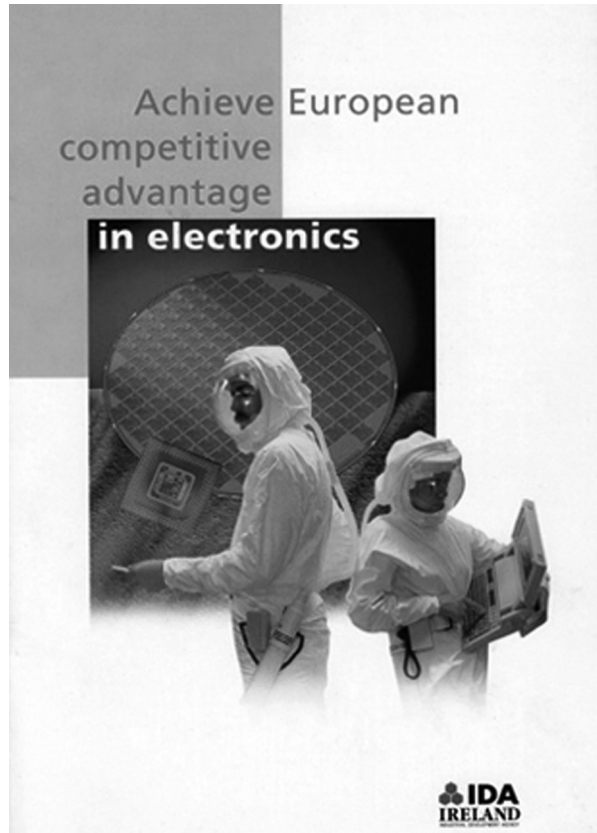
Figure 5: Cover image from 'Achieve European Competitive Advantage in Electronics' (IDA, 1999).

one size fits all. Boots dangle in a virginal white, evoking a sterile, numbered and beautiful bleakness – something quite ephemeral. 'Do you really find that interesting?' the Clean Room Supervisor asked, 'Whatever grabs your fancy I suppose, to each their own', he commented, 'but would you not want to get the lads working? On the line?' The supervisor's question acknowledged the obvious – to view and make images of the 'lads working'. Significantly, my decision to make portraits as part of the research constituted a strategic response to questions of representation whereby public and private organisations repeatedly depict individual workers occupied, employed and made busy with the tasks at hand. Such pedestrian images of labour continue to be reproduced and circulated.

Ireland's aspiration to be part of the global technology economy is reflected on the cover of an Industrial Development Authority (IDA, 1999) publication (Figure 5), which employs images coded 'high-tech'. Two anonymous workers, uniformed in white suits, are preoccupied with the job in hand. Both are silhouetted in the glow of the sun-like shape of a microchip wafer. The use of the primary colours in the lighting of the image appears repeatedly in popular media, signifying notions of technology and high-end development.

Mark Curran

Figure 6: 'Lava' (still), Building 8, 12.04 p.m., Monday, 1 December, 2003 (Leixlip, Ireland) Digital Video Projection (looped).

On the day I found myself among the hanging gowns in the Clean Room, photographing these empty vestiges of labour (Figure 4), a sense of history in the making was powerfully evoked; the gowns became an ephemeral representation of fleeting labour, an embodiment without the body of the here and now. In his discussion of postmodernism, Craig Owens foregrounds the role of allegory, its central ability 'to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear', and how allegory 'is consistently drawn to the fragmentary' ([1984] 1992: 1052–1057) For as David Green relatedly notes, 'the only possibility of reinventing the representation of history is using photography through allegory' (1994: 15).

Standing still, my liaise from HP watched on. I touched the red button and the digital video camera began to record. Perched upon a tripod, it is directed towards the large blue grey section of plastic – a vertical gash up its right side, a suture made of tape (Figure 6). Behind, men and women labour to install the new line; inaudible voices and movement in the direction of here and there amongst the high-pitched, sonar-sounding reminders of other production lines at work, hissing and expelling bloated exasperations, compressed air as they push ever on. A sway of plastic, a membrane-like structure, and then, very slowly, almost unaware and yet somewhat suddenly, it expands, ebbing forward only to retreat gently. Objects behind, formerly draped in blue are suddenly re-engulfed, surrounded, masked. It then starts all over again and the production line to our left utters a gasp.

My ethnographic objective had always been to remain open to the methodological possibility of using digital video as a reflexive research tool. However, to what end was unclear until the research work on site

began, when, as Hammersley and Atkinson note, 'features that previously seemed insignificant may come to take on new meaning' (1995: 180). Locations that had previously been photographed threw up new possibilities. Beyond its capacity to constitute yet another intervention in the industrialised space of HP, the application of the moving image provided a further means to reflect critically upon my primary medium – still photography – and the relationship between the two.

In her discussion of stillness within the moving image, Laura Mulvey discusses the potential for allegory within the still image. Mulvey considers whether there exists within the moving image the possibility for the 'non-movement of narrative [providing a point where] the flow of the story can give way to the presence of the document' (2003: 119). I made 'on the spot' decisions regarding the production of such material. This resulted from my ongoing review and reflection of research progress to date, but was further determined by questions of access and time constraints. Each section of digital video acquired the form of 24-minutes, intended as a direct reference to the number of hours in the day the plant ceaselessly operated. Each section was made in one complete long-take from a fixed position, the non-movement intended as a reflexive gesture evidencing my embodied presence, while simultaneously referencing still photography whereby that which lay within the frame was open to the same readings of allegory.

III

Entering the passageway of the installation space, the viewer is made aware of gasps echoing the low, hissing, breath-like sound of the lines and is presented with a table, bulb-lit and a paper pile of workers' testimonies. The exhibition pamphlet, an artefact, title on the front and to be unfolded, reveals layerings of text printed on architect's paper – testimonies from several of the contracted workers on the floor, a warehouse supervisor and the Vice-President of HP – and which, when fully unfolded, lead in and out of each other offering multiple labouring perspectives[6] (Figure 7).

Viewers have the possibility to navigate the space how they may choose. Their shadows rise, fall, fall upon – their presence made manifest within the projection space, implicated in this living industrial history. The curator Rebecca Solnit observes: 'Installation itself insists on a more bodily, diffuse experience, on the possibility of ongoing creation and transformation, on unframed, unresolved contextuality. It may be that landscape has become environment, politically and phenomenologically' (1993: 232). Hence, as a topographical evocation of globalised industrial labour, the viewer is invited to continuously supplement meaning and provide their own reading.

The audio emanating from the digital video, 'Lava' (Figure 8), envelops the installation of *The Breathing Factory* – an internal space possessing an atmosphere, darkened and unfinished, bared walls, slightly cold, no windows, eyes drawn initially to illuminated artefacts. However, the shadows matter and provide a narrative space in and between the objects amid the breathing soundscape. As Van Assche remarks, 'that which lies outside of the image can be conceived as a more mental terrain and remains to be explored' (2003: 97). An installation space should therefore ideally provoke

Mark Curran

Figure 7: Installation, The Breathing Factory, *Gallery of Photography, Dublin, November 2006.*
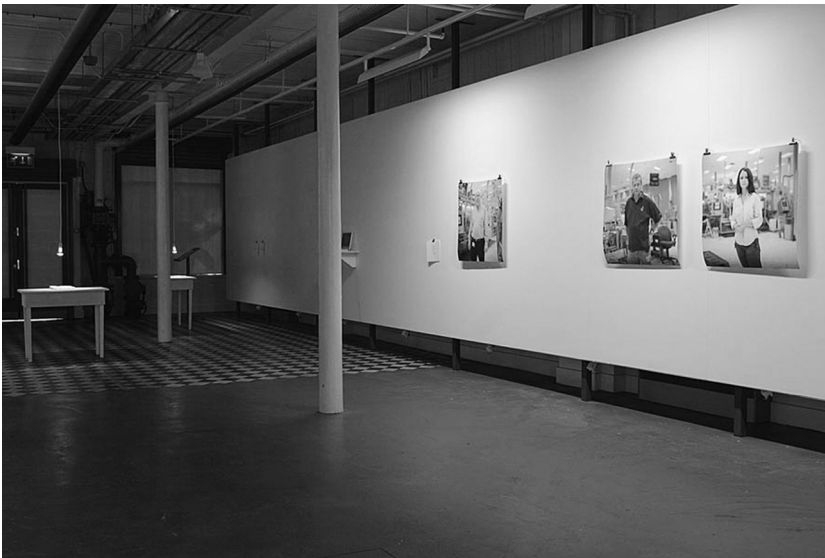

Figure 8: Installation, The Breathing Factory, *Belfast Exposed Photography, April 2006.*

a reaction, a response from within the viewer to a 'three-dimensional volume', an opening out rather than the closing down of meaning, '[giving] the spectator an active role to play in a work . . . [where] the work becomes itself a theatre and in which the spectator is "co-performer"' (2003: 94). On another nearby wall is a small image (Figure 9), box-framed, untouchable, behind glass. A photograph obscured by a simple post-it note, in blue ink: 'I don't want Mark to use this picture. The rest are fine, thanks, Ed'. The intervention of an engineer, a policed presence made present.

Figure 9: Installation, The Breathing Factory, *Gallery of Photography, Dublin, November 2006.*
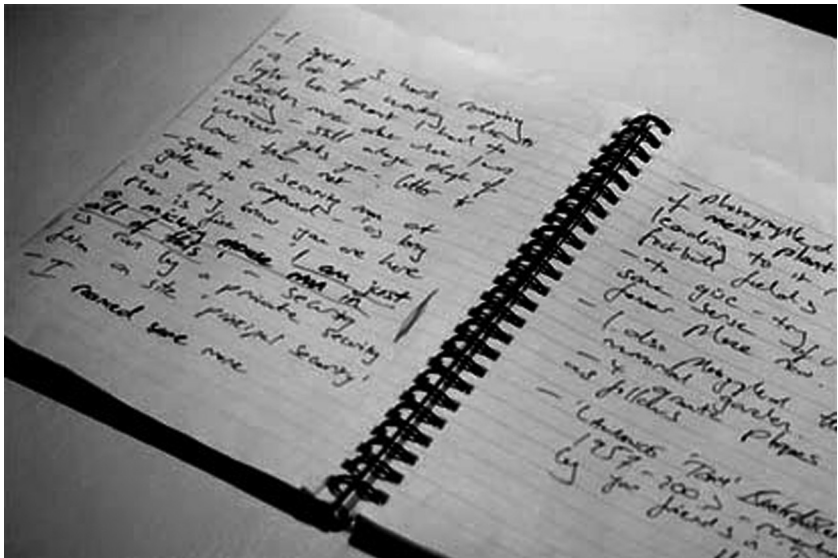

Figure 10: Installation, The Breathing Factory, *Gallery of Photography, Dublin, November 2006.*

Further on, a diary is presented on a table (Figure 10), isolated in a large section of the installation, opened at particular pages and illuminated again by a single bulb. It reads:

I spent three hours roaming. A lot of waiting due to light meant I had to consider more what I was making. Spoke to a security man who said, "as

Mark Curran

long as they know you are here that's fine, I am just a Mickey Mouse man in all of this"

<div align="right">(Thursday, 22 April, on bus back to Dublin)</div>

The light of a single bulb, suspended from the ceiling, instantiates multiple subject positions. Behind, two paper pages, clipped to the wall, allude to the previous history of the site and the factory that had formerly resided on this spot, before it closed. Looking back over the viewer's shoulder towards the far wall and directly opposite the table is Ebelonga (Figure 11), clad in white. Referring to another photograph but unframed and in an altogether different cultural and spatiotemporal context, Siegfried Kracauer was critical of photography's iconic status, although, he conceded, 'the photograph may act as a trigger, a momentary encounter with mortality, an awareness of history that does not include us' ([1926] 1997: 26). In its estrangement photography may open up new imaginative possibilities, histories made visible in which viewers are always implicated.

The portrait of Ebelonga (Figure 12) is sited on a cement wall – her presentation, unfinished. Like all the other portraits, hers is exhibited on bare, exposed, inkjet paper – material employed for a woman working at HP's Dublin Inkjet and Manufacturing Operation (DIMO) – one metre by

Figure 11: 'Ebelonga, Clean Room Operator, 10.22 a.m., Thursday, 20 November 2003' (Leixlip, Ireland). Ultrachrome Print.

Figure 12: Installation, The Breathing Factory, *Gallery of Photography, Dublin, November 2006.*

one metre in size. She is spotlit from above, her presence foregrounded, no frame, hanging, merely by bullclips – (re)movable and replaceable. Pink comments how, 'no image or photographic practice is essentially ethnographic "by nature," but the 'ethnographicness' of photography is determined by discourse and content' (2001: 50). All images, it would appear, are defined by the contexts in which they are made and the imposition of competing theoretical discourses surrounding their meaning.

At this or some other point the viewer may gaze at these portraits in search of meaning: 'Working in Ireland, in 2005'. 'White uniforms covering bodies?' 'A vetted picture?' 'A table in an open space and a single light?' 'Bits of plastic moving forward and back?' 'Breathing sounds?' Echoing Van Assche, Pink discusses such 'open-endedness' of meaning and the challenges it presents, arguing that linear, bound, written and 'finished' submissions of research are indeed limited due 'to their capacity to represent a reality that is in fact continuous and subjectively experienced' (2001: 167).

The translation of the ethnographic material into a 'multivocal' installation was deliberately designed to demonstrate a methodological emphasis on an epistemology of the 'evocative' – one which reflects critically on the audio and visual fragments collated in the globalised industrial space of Hewlett-Packard. As the cultural theorist Ben Highmore notes: '[T]he potential of montage is the production of a representation . . . [that] attempts to see the world as a network of uneven, conflicting, unassimilable but relating elements' (2002: 95). The methodological framework discussed, I argue, characterised by a rigorous reflexive approach affords potential framing devices, albeit fractured, through which the labour 'conditions within', to borrow Brecht's words, can be critically represented.

Mark Curran

As on the HP factory floor, the breath-like hiss of the production lines continues to enclose the installation space. The viewer may now stand back, look left. Moving forward, a narrow passage is revealed. At the end, the suspended gowns hang (Figure 4).

Confronted. No exit. The viewer must now return through the space, pamphlet in hand, pages turned in and on themselves. She or he may decide to glance through the written testimonies, perhaps to a conversation between myself and Lionel Alexander, Vice-President of HP Ireland:

M: How does Ireland ensure the longevity of what has been a profound economic transformation?
L: The first step . . . the first step they've made which I'm really pleased about is, don't tie investment to jobs. Do not always ask if I want to get a grant, "how many jobs is this going to create?" The paradigm shift from just job-creation to job-preservation has to happen . . . at the end of the day . . . no multinational has any emotional attachment to Ireland . . . or Singapore or China or India . . . it's business right . . . and if there's no business reason to be in a country . . . we will not . . . we will leave . . . we will leave tomorrow.

References

Bal, M. (1996), 'The Discourse of the Museum', in R. Greenberg et al. (eds.), *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London: Routledge.

Benjamin, W. (1931), 'A Small History of Photography', in E. Jephcott and K. Shorter (eds.), (1979), *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Verso.

Curran, M. (2006), *The Breathing Factory*, Heidelberg: Edition Braus and Belfast Exposed Photography.

Green, D. (1994) 'Time After Time', *Creative Camera*, June/July (338) 10–15.

Hammersley, M and Atkinson, P. (eds.) (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Second Edition). London: Routledge.

Hartz, P. (1996), *The Company That Breathes: Every Job has a Customer*, Berlin: Springer Verlag.

Highmore, B. (2002), *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.

IDA Ireland (2000), *Annual Report 1999*, Dublin: IDA.

——— (2005), *Annual Report 2004*, Dublin: IDA.

Kracauer, S. (1997), *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lowry, J. (2003), 'From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality', in D. Green (ed.), *Where is the Photograph?,* Photoworks Photoforum, University of Brighton.

Marcus, G. (1995), 'The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage', in L. Devereaux, and R. Hillman (eds.), *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mulvey, L. (2003), 'Stillness in the Moving Image', in D. Green (ed.), *Where is the Photograph?,* Photoworks Photoforum, University of Brighton.

Newbury, D. (2001), *Diaries and Fieldnotes in the Research Process*, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD), Birmingham: University of Central England.

O'Brien, C.C. and O'Brien, M. (1999), *Ireland: A Concise History*, London: Thames and Hudson.

O'Riain, S. (2000), 'Net-Working for a Living: Irish-Software Developers in the Global Workplace', in Burawoy et al. (eds.), *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Owens, C. (1984), 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism', in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900 – 1990*, London: Blackwork.

Pink, S. (2001), *Doing Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, London: Sage.

Roberts, J. (1997), *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966 – 1976*, London: Camerawork.

Sekula, A. (1978), 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (notes on the Politics of Representation)', in A. Sekula (ed.), (1999), *Dismal Science, Photo Works 1972 – 1996*, Chicago: University Galleries of Illinois State University.

——— (2001), 'Excerpts From an Interview', in *Mois de la Photographie 8 novembre – 16 décembre 2001*, Centre Régional de Cherbourg-Octeville (catalogue).

Solnit, R. (1993), 'Unsettling the West: Contemporary American Landscape Photography', in D. Britain (ed.), (1999), *Creative Camera: 30 Years of Writing*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Tyler, S.A. (1989), 'Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document', in J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Van Assche, C. (2003), 'The State of Things', in T. Leighton and P. Buhler (eds.), (2003), *Saving the Image: Art After Film*, Glasgow: Centre for Contemporary Arts.

Suggested citation

Contributor details

Mark Curran lives and works in Berlin and Dublin. He is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, Dublin Institute of Technology, and an Associate Lecturer in Photography at the Institute for Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin. Curran's previous project, *Southern Cross* (Gallery of Photography 2002), was published and exhibited internationally. *The Breathing Factory* (Edition Braus 2006) has been widely presented and was a finalist for the CEDEFOP PhotoMuseum Award 2007 at the Museum of Photography, Thessalonika, Greece. In 2008 it will presented as part of the biennale, Septembre de la Photographie, in Lyon, France. Curran was the recipient of an inaugural *New Work Visual Arts Bursary* from the Arts Council of Ireland towards his present research project, one sited in a declining industrialised region in the former East Germany. Contact: Mark Curran, Ph.D. Candidate, Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, DIT, Dublin, and Associate Lecturer, BA (Hons) Photography, IADT-DL, Dublin, Ireland.
E-mail: markjc1999@hotmail.com