

Working Conditions



Emmanuelle Lainé, *Where the Rubber of Ourselves Meets the Road of the Wider World* (2017), photography.

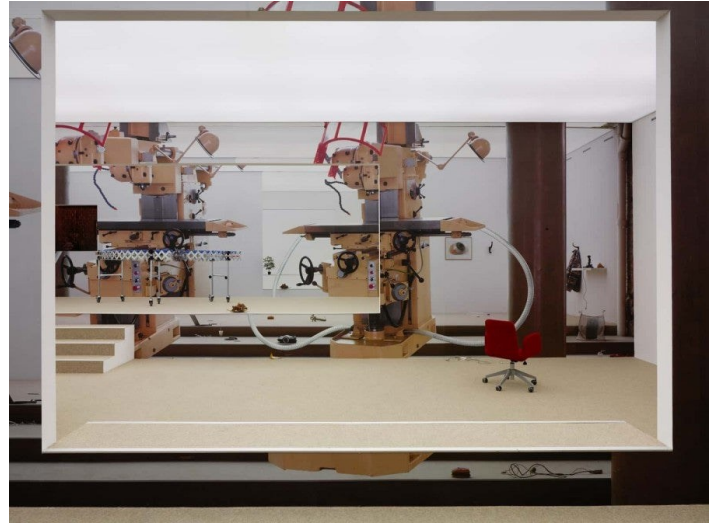
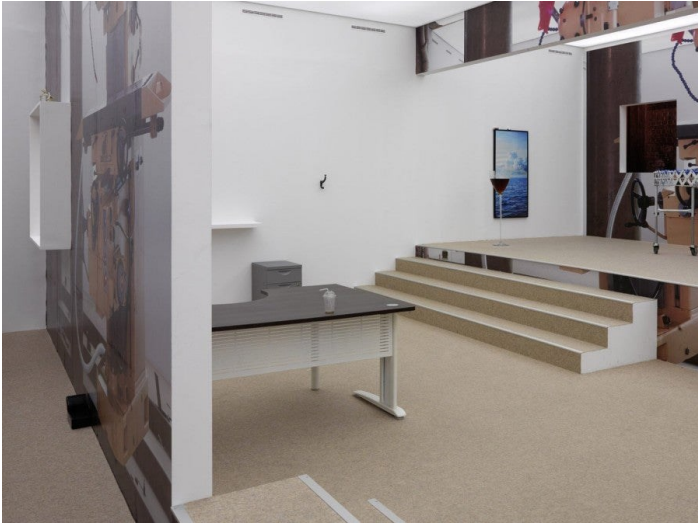


Nora Sternfeld and Emmanuelle Lainé, Paris, September 2017.

“A convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others”¹. – Ivan Illich

Ivan Illich imagines another world based on “conviviality” – on the ability to relate to each other and to things, to build the world with tools and to work together. Yet we do not live in a convivial society, but in a neoliberal world that promises fantastic infrastructures, while creating new conditions of exploitation based on algorithms. In this world we find ourselves increasingly alone in our increasingly unsafe lives. How can we imagine an alternative future in this world? Might it help to look at irrepressible relationships – the relationships we entertain with our tools and with each other in spite of everything?

Without naivety or false promises but with persistence, two exhibitions by Emmanuelle Lainé tackled this question in summer 2017. *Where the Rubber of Ourselves Meets the Road of the Wider World* at Palais de Tokyo was a three-dimensional trompe l’oeil photograph that created a space within the space by expanding into a walk-in diorama. At first sight, it depicted a machine – a machine that produces tools. At the same time, Lainé presented *Incremental Self : les corps transparents* at Bétonsalon, on the other side of Paris, a cinematic installation that documents her encounters with three artists living in a retirement home and a specialised worker – people who entertain a strong relationship with the tools with which they work. Lainé used two different artistic approaches to look at our relationship to tools from two different angles. On the backdrop of the uncanny scenario that characterises the present world, she revealed to us relationships despite their becoming impossible in this world: in one case as an encounter with tools, and in the other as an encounter with those who work in a close relationship with them.



Emmanuelle Lainé, *Where the Rubber of Ourselves Meets the Road of the Wider World*, 2017, photograph (detail).

1.

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 ...

The work at Palais de Tokyo took the form of a stage inviting exhibition-goers to step onto it. Those who accepted the enticing invitation to step into the world of the machine encountered a motley collection of seemingly abandoned objects, almost ghostly and mute. What could the empty office furniture, the silent machine, the loose computer cable, the device for mobile warehouse logistics, the generic image of a seascape and a rubber hamburger have in common? They formed an abandoned scenario of everyday activity, instruments, tools and utensils - traces of work. And so, despite their differences, if not incompatibility, they seemed to point to something that may yet have to be invented. This is precisely what I want to address in this essay, which looks for connections by sneaking into the diorama space at Palais de Tokyo, reading the interviews from the filmic installation at Bétonsalon, listening to the protagonists and connecting them to other people, but also inventing things. While most of the protagonists in

this text exist, others are invented, yet they could be real. They are allegories only in Walter Benjamin's sense², in that they maintain a tension between the personal and the general, the self and the world – a characteristic they share with the machine and the objects in Lainé's installation.

So here we are, standing in the middle of a machine – no, in the middle of a three-dimensional photograph of a machine. The setting simultaneously reveals and obscures, the materiality of production is at once concrete and generic, specific and universal. For the history of labour is also the history of every individual production, a history of exploitation, but also of knowledge and know-how. With this in mind, let us listen to Thierry Gabrielli, a worker at Scop-TI, a cooperative factory that produces teas and herbal teas. Lainé interviewed him near Gémenos, France, in January-February 2017. Here is an excerpt from the conversation:

'Well, I'm a mechanic by training. We've always been told that it took at least five to eight years to be good at what we do. That's the time it takes to get to know these machines. They're called Teepacks, they're German machines – I had to adapt the tools, adapt the machines. [...] We managed to crank up the Teepacks to 186 and even 190 strokes per minute for the herbal teas. I'm telling you this because in '89, yes, '89, we went on strike in Marseille. When we learned that we would be relocated, we went on strike. They took our herbal tea bags and sent them to all the other factories that produced herbal teas, to be packaged there. This is how they tried to quash the strike. But they didn't succeed. These people only made tea! They couldn't deal with herbal tea! So some time later, they gave up. Some of our demands were met. Not all. Transportation allowance and some other things³ . . .'

We thus learn about the specialist skills of Thierry Gabrielli, about his experience and competence in getting the machine to do something for which it had not been designed. His work enabled the machine to transcend and expand its primary function. This had long been useful to the company, and when the threat of relocation loomed large, it was also useful to the workers on strike in their negotiations with the management.



Emmanuelle Lainé, Incremental Self, 2017, 3 channel video installation , H.D. colour and sound, 20 min (still).

“Despite working hard they can say “Thank you, there is the door”...”

In the centre of Lainé’s installation, parallel to the horizontal plane of the photographed and wallpapered machine, stands an enigmatic device on wheels. It looks like a mobile, horizontal newspaper stand made of metal. As I learned, it is used to transport goods in the warehouses of Amazon’s logistics centres. Lost in the middle of the installation, it seems as empty and forlorn as the other objects designed to serve a production that has now been halted. The thorough and absurd uselessness of these tools – which are only tools because they are useful – prompts further questions: What is the work cadence at Amazon? I think of a worker – let us call her Vanda T. – who is employed by Amazon in Brieselang, near Berlin. She is shifting these devices around. Her body adapts to the space, which is built for machines that are faster than her body. The cadence of her work is based on a productivity rate. We know that she actually exists, because she

was part of a labour dispute in 2015 that undermined Amazon's anti-union policy. However, we do not know her real name, because her testimonials remained anonymous⁴. She could therefore be a woman or a man. During the protests she spoke about her work. She knows that she and her co-workers are played off against each other:

'We all started new in this warehouse, they call it a "fulfilment centre". Only a few people were shifted over from the Leipzig warehouse to get things running; they had more experience. They trained us. The first impression was: this place is huge! Having worked on construction sites before, I thought that this is more like a nursery, in the sense that they emphasise safety a lot: you have to wear safety boots, high-vis, use the handrails, don't take personal belongings down to the shop-floor and so on. You are supposed to walk on the designated footpath. They call it "standard work"; everyone is supposed to work in a similar fashion. It is quite militaristic, in a sense. They actually look for ex-army men when hiring supervisory staff. Markings on the floor tell you where to go. For me the easiest way to remember were the black signs to the smoking area . . . Initially the pressure was not that high, because the whole warehouse operation had just started and the majority of people had to get used to things. But after four weeks or so – I worked in Outbound at the time – it became clear that it's about targets, about achieving numbers. More and more people were hired and I was supposed to train them. That was rather weird for me. They just called us to Room 175 or something, and when we arrived there they said: "Oh, great that you have volunteered to become a 'co-worker' [trainer]", though actually we had been informed about fuck all. Basically they said: "Keep on doing your job, keep smiling and show the new ones how to work." Then rumours started to spread: "Why have these guys been chosen to become 'co-workers'? Does that mean they will get a permanent contract?" In this way the first division amongst the first batch of workers was created. Actually they didn't give permanent contracts to all the "co-workers". I guess I only got one because I hadn't taken any sick leave and sometimes came in for extra shifts⁵.'

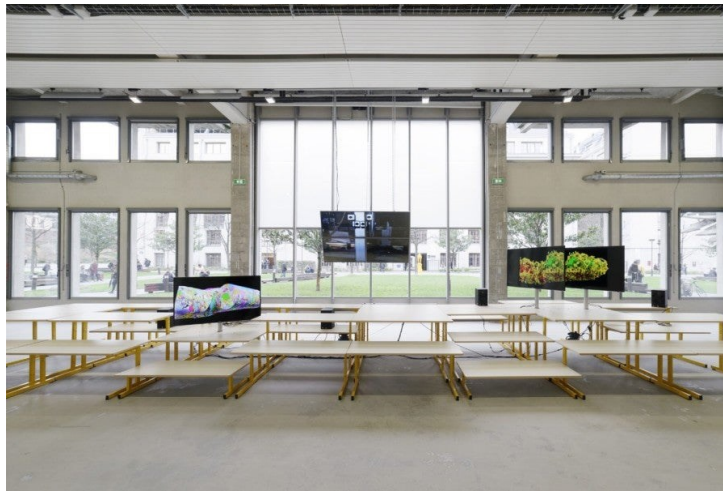
Vanda T. could have been anyone. It could have been a mechanic from the so-called 'Dock' who had previously worked in a metal factory at Amazon in Poznań, for example. Their experiences would have been similar, as he also spoke of the permanent feeling of insecurity and of the support among colleagues that kept him going after all:

"During the last few months I realised how insecure the future is – people came and left again, no one knew who would stay and why. We are always facing up to this fear – we don't get any messages saying that we do a good job and that our job is secure. Despite working hard they can say "Thank you, there is the door" at any time. And the chaos concerning payments and bonuses! What do I like here? Most of all, the good colleagues in the "Dock"⁶!

Arlette Chapius, on the other hand, is a retired artist who lives in the Maison Nationale des Artistes, a French retirement home for artists. When Lainé

interviewed her, she spoke of her relationship to tools:

'Tools? Which tools I prefer, you mean? The brushes? Yes. Are there some brushes that I like more than others? Yes. Well, there are some right here. This big brush, for example, it's a beautiful brush, it's made of marten fur, it's worth a fortune now. And I like it very much. It has been used a lot, it has worked a lot, it's been . . . I respect it, I really do. The other ones too, but this one has its very own character. It's crazy. Not just physically, but it speaks to me, you see. That's just how it is. It's a pretty extraordinary being, really. Interesting, curious about everything, I was never bored with it even for a second. I was never bored. There was always something lively, something new. We don't talk to say nothing. On the contrary. And so I liked it very much.'⁷



Emmanuelle Lainé, Incremental Self : les corps transparents, 2017, exhibition view, Bétonsalon, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole.

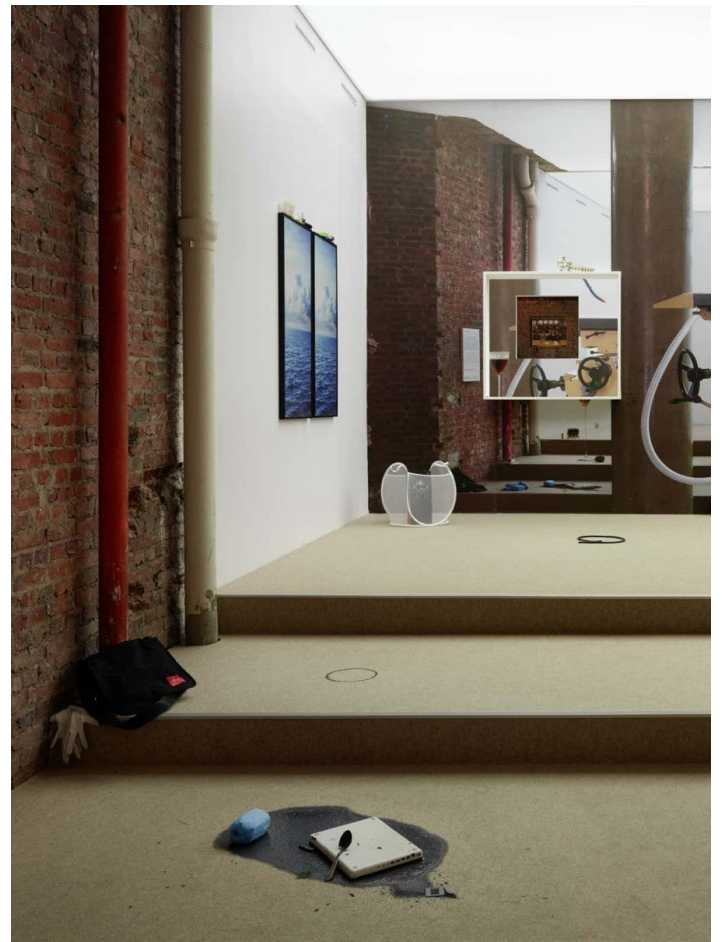
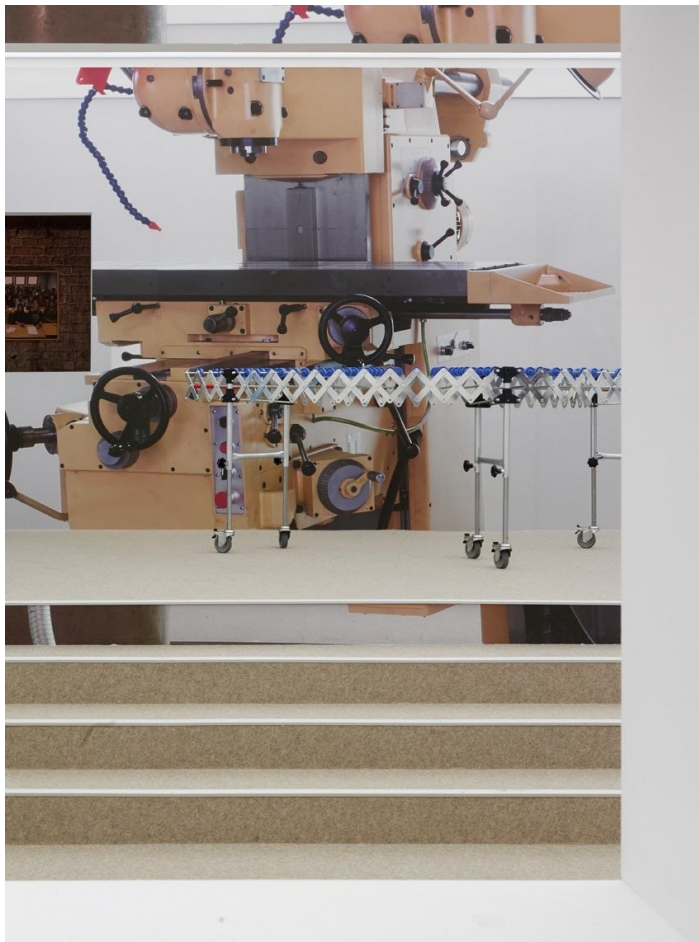
2.

Lainé's aesthetics are not relational - or if they are, then only to the extent that they reveal these relationships.

Maybe it is precisely because of the strange feeling of emptiness characterising Lainé's installation at Palais de Tokyo with its generic work furniture that our affective relation to tools, the love and tenderness we experience for the objects that we manipulate to produce something, can shine through. What dreams has this office chair been privy to? What meetings were held at this table, how many trainees' tears had to be dried here? Maybe the furniture belongs to an art institution, with its precarious working conditions. Maybe an unpaid trainee sat here, a young art historian with ambitious goals and full of shame after being once again humiliated by the director, who can never remember their name. And what about the rubber hamburger? What is it doing here? The protagonist that I imagine when I look at it reckons that housework is not actual work. And yet, as she spends her time looking after her kids, tidying up the house, trying to get the next job, building a new website, storing away the rubber hamburger and fishing her mobile phone out of the loo, she says to herself: 'This is my work. This is how I

spend my days.'

Lainé's installations confront us with orphaned objects. Her objects are not symbols; they bear the traces of real work. Yet in her installations, they are eerily quiet. Far from the 'agency' of things described by Bruno Latour⁸, they are hardly compelling and active. Rather, their muteness throws us back onto our knowledge, the science with which we get them to run, or onto our experience, with which we can order and store them away in the background. But if they are not symbols, what are they? Maybe allegories in the Benjaminian sense – fragments, contemporary ruins that have been removed from the all-encompassing context of life? Maybe as allegories they stand as much for themselves as for anything else? Lainé's installation is not about work in a post-Fordist age – it is *about* nothing. It draws us into a space of silent objects, into an encounter with deceptively perfect settings, with broken and fragmented tools, in which we might recognise our own experiences with neoliberal illusions, our own sapience and affects in post-Fordism – our specific knowledge, our concrete relationships to and with objects. Because it avoids the totalising reference of the symbol, allegory partly subverts representation, in the sense of a meaningful visualisation. The allegorical thinker 'accepts things as damaged as they are', writes Andreas Greiert on Benjamin's allegorical *perspective*⁹. Allegory, therefore, challenges our thinking – the thinking of a world that is by no means in order, yet a thinking that is also affective and opens up a possible other future. Lainé's installation seems to translate this Benjaminian allegory of the fragment into the present of post-Fordist or logistics-capitalistic infrastructures. Maybe the concrete rubber hamburger refers to a counterpart in our lives; maybe when looking at the simultaneously concrete and generic – but in any case cheaply framed – images of a horizon over the sea, we remember exciting moments or the banal emptiness of a waiting room or a conference hotel.



Emmanuelle Lainé, *Where the Rubber of Ourselves Meets the Road of the Wider World*, 2017, photograph (detail).

Maybe we recognise the care of a mother, the attachment of a worker to her colleagues, against whom she is being played off, maybe we know something about the finesse of machines, about the ability to find our own feelings in the ghostly world of generic images and to stand by them, to survive, to produce, to defend ourselves and to continue. These specific relationships to tools, to things and between humans – which Illich has summed up under the term ‘conviviality’ – are mostly present in Lainé’s work through their absence. Lainé’s aesthetics are not relational – or if they are, then only to the extent that they reveal these relationships. For we may find that her human diorama of meaningless things refers to ourselves. We encounter the objects we work with, the means of production that we have long grown used to investing in ourselves, the loose computer cables, which call upon our knowledge, our ability to do something else with them than what they were intended for or what they do to us. Our encounter with objects and tools and their stories is at once personal and universal. As in Benjamin’s allegory, *the rubber of ourselves meets the road of the wider world*.

Textwork

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1. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1975), 33.
3. Quoted in Emmanuelle Lainé, *Incremental Self* (2017), 3-channel video installation, HD video, colour, sound, 20 min.
5. Ibid.
7. Quoted in: Emmanuelle Lainé, *Incremental Self* (2017) 20 Min, 3 channels installation, H.D. colour and sound video.
9. Andreas Greiert, *Erlösung der Geschichte vom Darstellenden. Grundlagen des Geschichtsdenkens bei Walter Benjamin 1915–1925* (Paderborn - Wilhelm Fink, 2011), 241.
11. Vgl. Walter Benjamin, „Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels“, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. I-1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1987, S. 337-409.
13. Siehe „Welcome to the Jungle: Working and Struggling in Amazon Warehouses“, *AngryWorkersWorld*, 20.12.2015, <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/2015/12/20/welcome-to-the-jungle-working-and-struggling-in-amazon-warehouses/>
15. Ebd. Vgl. auch Ralf Ruckus, „Confronting Amazon“, *Jacobin*, 31.03.2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/amazon-poland-poznan-strikes-workers>
17. Vgl. etwa Bruno Latour, *Der Berliner Schlüssel. Erkundungen eines Liebhabers der Wissenschaften*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1996.
2. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1928], trans. John Osborne, (London - Verso, 2009)
4. See 'Welcome to the Jungle: Working and Struggling in Amazon Warehouses', *AngryWorkersWorld*, 20 December 2015, <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/2015/12/20/welcome-to-the-jungle-working-and-struggling-in-amazon-warehouses/>.
6. Ibid. For an extensive record of the labour dispute at Amazon in Poznań in 2015, see Ralf Ruckus, 'Confronting Amazon', *Jacobin*, 31 March 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/amazon-poland-poznan-strikes-workers>
8. See Bruno Latour, 'The Berlin Key or How to Do Things with Words', in *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, ed. P. M. Graves-Brown (London - Routledge, 2000), 10–21.
10. *Ivan Illich, Selbstbegrenzung: Eine politisch Kritik der Technik, übers. v. Ylva Eriksson-Kuchenbuch, C. H. Beck, München 1998, S. 28*
12. Zit. in: Emmanuelle Lainé, *Incremental Self* (2017), Drei-Kanal-Videoinstallation, HD-Video, Farbe, Ton, 20 Min.
14. Zit. in: „Welcome to the Jungle“, ebd.
16. Zit. in: Lainé, *Incremental Self*, ebd.
18. Andreas Greiert, *Erlösung der Geschichte vom Darstellenden. Grundlagen des Geschichtsdenkens bei Walter Benjamin 1915–1925*, Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2011, S. 241.