

FABRICANTS COULEURS

Marie Angeletti

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Installation views from the exhibition
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REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE
Hans-Ulrich Obrist

Working environments seem to attract the attention of artists again and again. Hans Peter Feldmann's *Eine Firma* is a photographic portrait of all the workers in a company. Fischli/Weiss' *Ten Rules How To Work Better* is an appropriated find from a factory in Thailand.

Marie Angeletti's project *Fabricants Couleurs* approaches a factory, their workers and its peculiarities.

Her project is set in the basement of art production: a paint factory which is owned by Pébéo, the sponsors of the work. As a conceptual photographer her approach was to collaborate with the workers from Pébéo's two factories, located in France and China. Within this collaboration she wanted to create images from the space, but also to return work and ideas to the space, to turn the factory into a site of exchange, production and exhibition. The interstice between herself as an artist and the employees at the factory is as important as the exhibition itself or this present publication. (One emblematic aspect of the project was to initiate a wall painting by the factory workers that would remain as a permanent work in the space in China.) Artworks as decorations seemed to be naturally omnipresent in both locations. Marie decided to isolate these works from their contexts in order to look for possibilities of artistic autonomy. In an interview I did with her, she states: "I wanted to see if there are employees from this factory who were making artworks in their spare time, and if some would be interested in collaborating on my project by making their own artworks for the exhibition during their working hours. I was then shown their paintings and rephotographed them. Their paintings are indexically linked to my collaboration with the workers. I'm interested in the copy as much as the original."

The questions that arose in the peculiar setting of a factory that produces paint were: what do people do when they have all the material they need for painting? Does the surrounding paint trigger their creativity?

The work that evolved from this collaboration reminds me of another art project that dealt with the works of amateur painters: Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings* (2000). Shaw collected paintings by ordinary people, which he got in thrift stores, and exhibited the accumulated works in a space where 'real art' was supposed to be shown. Here the parameters used when looking at art, such as iconography and biography, were subverted since the works were obviously those of non-professionals, even though they still seemed to reflect the whole history of art.

By having workers involved in decorating their own workplace in both factory locations, Marie Angeletti's artistic intervention similarly deals with the creativity of the staff.

Marie stayed in China for several weeks to become familiar with the work setup there. She took generic photos of the factory, the workers' paintings and the surroundings. She collaborated with them through the artistic interchange of photographing their paintings and having them adapt the photos she made. Through a succession of workings and reworkings of the materials, she established a close and creative connection to the workers.

Seeing the differences in the creative product of the workers from both sites, she concluded "they are painting what they know, or have seen before." Therefore the workers in China depicted Mickey Mouse, because "these are the things they constantly see." For Marie it was interesting to see those differences: although the two places of production (France/China) are making exactly the same product, they are made by people who obviously do not share the same knowledge, as she states.

For the exhibition, the works from China were relocated to the factory in France. The project, which was then finally shown inside the French factory in Marseille, mirrors this transfer between two cultures, France and China. But that transfer is also mirrored in the format of an exhibition or an artist's book, since works by the employees were shown in the context of a professional art exhibition. Marie's project draws on these multiple layers, and the juxtaposition of the art works, the multiple authors, exhibition contexts, viewers and frames of reference raise the question of shifting meanings when something is decontextualized and shown in another social context.



1 *Double Bound Economies* is a three-year research project (2010–2013) based on a photographic archive from the GDR (1967–1990). It reveals what in 1982 Heiner Müller called a 'schizophrenic position' with regard to an economy caught between socialism and capitalism, inasmuch as products departing from an agenda of socialist production attempted to enter the international arena of capitalist trade circuits. *Double Bound*

Economies investigated the economic language of international trade within a 20th century world order (Cold War) in order to acquire a better understanding of present-day globalized economies (doubleboundeconomies.net).

2 The participation of the artist in the environment of labour and production also brings to mind the so-called *Bitterfelder Weg*, an initiative in real socialism in the former GDR, starting in the

1950s, in which factory workers actively engaged in artistic practice, and artists would create and perform in the shared work spaces. Artistic production would contribute to the idea of the collective. Workers were not only invited, but also very much encouraged to express themselves creatively in order to undermine the distinction of high and low culture as well as class, because art was traditionally considered a bourgeois practice. Yet, how

could existing socialism get rid of this bourgeois connotation while at the same time believing in the power of art? The *Bitterfelder Weg* also championed socialist realism, which banned all abstract, non-figurative ways of depicting the socialist human—the new human being. It included an entire societal concept. There, culture was something that completely impregnates society as a means of implementing social change.

LOGICS OF PRODUCTION

Estelle Blaschke, Doreen Mende

We asked ourselves how we might engage with Marie Angeletti's artistic practice. At first glance, it seems to have aspects in common with those we discussed in our project *Double Bound Economies*.¹ This led to Marie inquiring whether we would contribute to her book. Let us begin with the common ground: in addition to issues of labour and economics, there is the power of display, which involves shifting a visual practice from its original, non-artistic context to the rarefied spaces of art. Works are presented and made visible in an alien space with all of its associations, values and consequences. Both projects complicate the clear-cut distinction between what art is and what it is not. This shift seems to be an old avant-garde theme, yet both our projects and this work by Marie pivot around current concerns of labour and economics in relation to international or global circuits.

In *Double Bound Economies*, we displayed the photographic archive of a freelance photographer from the GDR, Reinhard Mende, who portrayed workers in people-owned factories between the 1960s and 1980s. He portrayed them as figures embedded in socialist factory production, documenting the factory workers with the same immersive focus that was given over to the objects produced in the place of work. Mende's photographs also record social life within the factory itself: we see workers in the collective discussing a technical drawing, taking a break together or sitting at a table with newspapers. Significantly, these photographs from GDR factories, depicting labour conditions of socialist production, were produced for the International Leipzig Trade Fair, which aimed to promote household products 'made by socialism' in order to attract trade partners,

particularly from non-socialist countries. In other words, the photographs were produced with an international public in mind, with the intention of seeking prospective new audiences (promotion), whilst also appealing to the public in attendance (through the actual display of objects and products).

Another point of common ground is the fact that the East German photographer turned the actual factory into a photo studio to produce images for public display in a clearly defined economic (and political) space—and with no claim to being art. In *Double Bound Economies* we processed the photographic archive from the GDR. Our large-scale artistic-curatorial research activity (and exhibition) automatically raised a number of questions in relation to the transformation of non-artistic visual practice into something else that shows up within the space of contemporary art. This is essentially what underlies Marie's project as well. She started collaborating with female workers in a Chinese paint factory, Lu and Wan, and two workers from the French factory, who paint in their free time. We do not know whether any of the workers' colleagues, supervisors, or even the factory owner had known about the secret artistic passion of some of the factory workers. We do not know whether the artistic project revealed an openly declared overlap between labour and leisure on all levels in the factory hierarchy. We do not know whether the painting practice was encouraged, as was common in the GDR where people-owned factories offered educational programmes for workers in writing literature, photography, and filmmaking² in order to make a formerly bourgeois cultural tradition in art accessible to the working class. Importantly, the paint factory in Kunshan is operated by French company based in Gémenos, which outsources labour to China to produce work materials for visual artists. The factory workers engage with a practice (art painting) that is usually situated within the domain of art and are therefore explicitly involved in the means of production in a double sense: they use the same material as international visual artists do; and even more importantly, they produce their own means of production (paint). This project tackles working conditions and the role of art in a global economy. It invites the following speculation: did the figure of the international artist turn into a factory worker under globalized working conditions; and vice versa, did the factory worker turn into an artist?

Photography as a medium plays an interesting role in this project; it works not only as a means of documentation, but also of appropriation. Marie

relocates the workers' paintings by photographing, exhibiting and publishing them in her own project. The workers' artworks are used and assembled, regardless of the context of production. This very capacity of disconnecting the object from its context is a powerful feature of photography and the basis of its versatility. However, it also touches upon one key criticism of the medium: photographs cannot fully exist outside their discourses and functions. The documentary mode of Marie's photographs produces a situation in which the functions and relations of the photographs we see can begin to appear interchangeable. The juxtaposition and processing of a diverse range of sources — their equalization — is indeed something which exists as a property of all cultural material, with artistic media being destabilised in the flow of information across international boundaries. Imagery, whether culturally or ideologically specific, is transferred, exchanged and unmoored from its original context. This is reinforced and perpetuated by an information economy, but should not be mistaken for a transparent or neutral act. Adding appropriation to the toolkit of artistic gestures, the Pictures Generation raised questions of identification, commonality and shared authorship, though it should be clear that this project was itself re-appropriated by art history and the market as a work of original unoriginality, where images become static while in Marie's project, images remain active and in flux.

Initially it may seem that Marie's project is essentially a visual commingling of function and relation. Let us throw a fragile thesis into the round: there is nothing that connects these two different spaces; function is separated from relation. That is to say, we are confronted with totally disparate economies and sociabilities within the two different working spaces, and all that connects them is the complication of the conditions of production. In other words: Marie's project indicates a point of connection: if we look at a page in this book that juxtaposes two images of a vase of red flowers, one painted, one on a computer screen, we sense a similarity of outcome that seems to indicate a crucial principle in Marie's artistic practice. Her project as a whole seems to work with eclecticism as an artistic tool. When we looked at the book's layout the first time, it was incomprehensible in that there are so many different media, genres, styles and references. The idea of not knowing or comprehending what you look at, the idea of non-identity, or inconsistency, seems to be central. It looks like a pop-culture magazine with its juxtaposition

of images from different sources, authors and methods or means of publication. These aspects of attempting the equalization of disparate languages and authorships are striking. Marie appears as the single author of the project; she signs the project as an artist and thus suggests reading the workers' paintings through an artistic lens. The act of appropriation does not produce a common project by Marie and a Chinese factory woman, as this would maintain a notion of authorship — where one name is notionally recognised within an artistic discourse, and another falls outside of it. Rather, the project complicates and makes unobtainable a clear notion of ownership or control. If the Pictures Generation artists could not escape the gesture of naming, Marie's work adopts an alternate tactic: it rigorously makes it harder to locate authorial presence in the work itself, weaving an effect of heterogeneity across the pages of the book. If an author, Marie, is at all in evidence, then as a wildly eclectic figure, whose subjecthood is determined by the logic of production, which privileges notions of 'choice', or more recently the 'search'. It would be a mistake to identify these choices as neutral or discrete, of course: neither choice nor the act of searching fall outside of critical decisions about identification or the logics of production and use.

In the final analysis, Marie's and our project are very different indeed. *Double Bound Economies* is based on a research process that aimed to develop a collective working method in which the various authorships (artist, curator, photographer) entered a radically de-authoring process. In contrast, Marie's project incorporated appropriation as a conceptual component and reversed it: she exhibited her project, consisting of works by Chinese and French workers and herself, in a paint factory in France, that is to say, within the conditions of globalized production as our new exhibition space: the entire Pébéo project, with this book and the exhibition, can be read as an artistic proposal to indicate proximities between spaces of industrial production — of factory, industry, labour — and artistic production, between spaces of art and non-art, art and life.

This text is the result of a conversation with Marie Angeletti in May 2013, which was recorded and revised as a continuous text.