

La Relève / Half-Day Shift (2008)

The striking difference in university life today compared to that of previous decades, in most of the European continent, is its increasing precariousness due to rising fees and the withdrawal of the state from supporting higher education. As a consequence of this growing trend students get progressively deeper in debt, pushing them towards the market of casual labour while they are studying: fast food restaurants, call centres, pizza delivery, night shifts... As far back as 2006 the French university student union SUD was already warning of the existence in France of some 40,000 students practising prostitution on an occasional basis to support their studies. In the same year, research by Kingston University London gave similar figures for the UK. In France as in the United Kingdom, for example, the increasing precariousness of university life is perhaps more visible than in other countries, where there has historically been less access to grants, and where the life of university students who do not have the financial support of their families has always been precarious. On the other hand, the withdrawal of state involvement in university finances drives them to operate almost like private enterprises, ruled by the equation between funding perceived as investment, and the productivity of knowledge measured in quantitative terms. This equation inevitably permeates all spheres of academic research as well as mediating the exchange and dissemination of knowledge through teaching. This double process can be interpreted as a contemporary extension of, or variation on, the peripheralization of university life that began in the 1970s, mostly as a strategy to delocalize dissidence and the student movements that emerged out of the lecture theatres. This variation takes the form of a growing and progressive elitism and encapsulation of the institution itself.

The university campus at Toulouse-Le Mirail was created at the start of the 1970s following this trend towards displacing combative faculties and student movements from the historical city centres. For example, in Toulouse, the Faculty of Humanities, now Université de Toulouse II, was moved to Le Mirail, a newly built neighbourhood on the periphery, while the Faculty of Law continued to be based in the original university building. After almost thirty years of existence of the Le Mirail campus, one can still see the radical scission between *life on the campus* and *life in the city*. But what is most striking about the immediate surroundings of the campus are not the empty plots typical of the urban peripheries, but the huge stone boulders which surround them and block all access to them. These massive blocks of stone transform the peripheral wasteground into a sort of condominium of underdevelopment, an *excessive* space managed as if it were under siege. The design of the campus, however, of its buildings and open spaces, its pergolas and walkways, evokes an architectural modernism which seems to belong more to the tropics than the cold French winter: a colonial reminiscence relocated to the "multicultural" periphery? This modernist architecture starkly contrasts with the raw matter of the wasteground and the boulders of the spaces *outside*.

The close proximity of these two types of spaces, the besieged wastegrounds and the heterotopic enclave of the campus, and all that they represent symbolically, generates hardly any overlap or interpenetration between neighbourhood and university. In Le Mirail, spaces of symbiosis or hybridity are scarce. Statistically the neighbourhood produces few young people that go on to university, and neither do many students choose to live there. Consequently, any social life students have in the area is limited to the cafes and fast food restaurants to be found between the campus entrance and the underground station. This route from the campus to the underground is perhaps the main point of real contact between the university and the neighbourhood: some three hundred metres of street and a handful of coffee bars. Another kind of space where neighbourhood and campus overlap each other is the temporary lecture rooms that the youth of Le Mirail squat in the evenings, weekends, and long holidays.

La Relève (Half Day Shift) is the result of a residency at the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail during the winter of 2008. The work is made up of four parts: two photographic sequences (one of them a digital projection), a grid of twenty photographs and one single photograph. The central theme of the images is not the time students spend doing (casual) remunerated work, nor the time they spend doing the studying that they pay for, these days, with their earnings. Both of these form part of the same economic and institutional structure which tends to compromise the intrinsic value of knowledge and study. The images, instead, turn their attention to the space and time that exists between these two moments of production, where the transition, and in a certain way the separation, between *life on the campus* and *life in the city* takes place. These are spaces where the university and the city interconnect, or short-circuit one another. These photographs were inspired especially by three works which represent "the moment in which the worker turns his back on work"¹: the film *La sortie de l'usine* by the Lumière brothers, made in Lyon in 1895; the series of photographs *Labor Anonymous* by Walker Evans, taken in Detroit in 1946; and *Untitled Slide Sequence* by Allan Sekula, made in San Diego in 1972.

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¹ From Harun Farocki's video *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* (1995)