



## A Dot in a Field — Cherry Smyth

Do you work here? You feed funny.  
You still.

Do you work here? Are you chef?  
Are you maid?

Do you work here? You are a dot  
in a field. Are you full?

from 'Radiant' by Ronaldo V. Wilson'

Ronaldo V. Wilson's powerful and provocative poetry and prose describe the micro-aggressions of white racism that inhabit and inhibit him as a black, queer man. On one hand, he is rejected for academic posts he's qualified for, while on the other, he's assumed to be at the service of others in white social settings. Like artist Adrian Piper, who alerts people to the hurt their casual racism causes, Wilson reveals the ugliness of discrimination in his mission for inclusivity and empowerment.

Inclusivity and empowerment are essential themes in Mikhail Karikis' sound and video installations. Drawn to people at the precarious peripheries of social environments, Karikis invites them to partake in a transformative experiment that re-centres them, and us, the spectator. His ethical re-imagining of social structures, especially around labour and hierarchies, follows Gertrude Stein's dictum: 'Act so that there is no use in a centre'.<sup>2</sup> In an earlier work, *Sounds From Beneath* (co-directed with Uriel Orlow), 2010, Karikis worked with a choir of retired coalminers, using abstract vocalisations to re-create the acoustic under-world they've lost and re-invoke their place in it. Set in a disused coalfield, *Sounds From Beneath* presents a tender lament for the meaningful belonging that determined the men's lives for so long.

Karikis is fascinated by the slow attrition of redundancy, by what makes people feel worthless. What happens to miners without mines, workers without work? Through his engaging and engaged practice, Karikis proposes a space of usefulness and recuperation through participation in art. *SeaWomen* (2012) followed the last generation of women on Jeju Island, South Korea, who deep dive for shellfish with no scuba equipment. Resplendent in their 70s and 80s, these women exuberantly refuse society's expectations around age and gender. As younger women prefer less physically demanding jobs, *SeaWomen* becomes an elegy for a dying, matriarchal tradition.

Similar concerns around work, tradition and the outsider drive Karikis' latest work *The Chalk Factory* (2017). The Rikagaku Chalk Industries, on the outskirts of Tokyo, employ mainly people with mental disabilities, a rare fact in any culture, but perhaps more so in Japan, where nearly all companies choose to be fined rather than employ the statutory 2% of people with disabilities. Across Europe too, access for those with disabilities remains stubbornly under-developed. In Denmark, over half of people with disabilities are employed, while in the UK the figure falls to just a third.

As in Karikis' previous works, *The Chalk Factory* uses site specificity to great effect by mapping the Tokyo factory onto 'O' Space in Aarhus, a building that was once a grain warehouse. The ten-channel video installation immerses us in the rhythms and routines of chalk production, from the mucky mixing of the bright magenta and acidic yellow pigments to the cautious packaging of the final product. On a separate single screen at the entrance, musician and storyteller, Kiku Day, creates a mythic invocation around the theme of 'otherness'. In this poised and elegant prologue, Day combines compelling storytelling with avant-garde and traditional breathing techniques on the shakuhachi flute to tell the Japanese story of Hyottoko, the God of Fire. As a boy, Hyottoko could not keep a job, failed to follow instructions and proved useless at everything he tried. However, when given a flute and told to blow to keep the fire alight, he succeeded and ended up with



the vital role of keeping the villagers warm and providing heat for cooking. It's clear that, in many respects, Hyottoko stands in for the artist, allergic to being told what to do, unwilling to submit to an unfulfilling job, only to find freedom and respect through a musical instrument and his courage to be himself. Like the Hyottoko, the artist is often deemed useless and undervalued in society, in spite of providing an essential, enlivening response to the way it works and sees itself. *Kiku Day* was filmed in the deserted loft of the Aarhus warehouse, where a white layer of flour pre-shadows the chalk dust that coats the Japanese factory. With de-saturated tones, the almost monochrome footage emphasises the abandonment of the space and the decline of the oral storytelling tradition as it 'fades to white'.

Inside the main installation, the factory workers' day begins like any other, as they clock in and start up the machinery. Then, unlike most other workplaces, they perform collective limbering exercises to the playful chimes of what, to us, resemble the jingle of an ice cream van. We watch as they methodically feed clumps of chalk mass into machines, sort the lengths into position, select items from a conveyor belt. Whether it is sweeping up rough cuts or straightening the ends of chalk with the flick of a fork, each worker perfectly suits their role – each becoming a kind of Hyottoko. In one poignant scene, an attentive worker removes the wonky or broken chinks from the baked tray, but rather than being discarded, the flawed pieces are recycled into the next batch. When we consider that most of us first learned to draw using chalk and to read from chalk letters on a blackboard, it is fitting that this low-tech material plays a crucial role in a progressive employment practice. It recalls the playfulness of childhood, and the pleasure of using a material that could be so easily erased that there was no such thing as a mistake.

Karikis quietly challenges the perception of people with disabilities as infantile, in need of help or medicalised. His shy, somewhat protective framing is careful to eschew both sentimentality and pity. Rather it shows people excelling at their

appointed roles, without narrative voiceover, interviews or dialogue. The gentle team spirit is subtly delivered by scenes of the monthly karaoke session where they applaud each other, as tuneless and happy as most karaoke singers are. Two workers are lost in the silent rapture of listening, their faces beaming. As Karikis mostly avoids close-ups, which could be interpreted as voyeuristic or intrusive, these two sequences are the most intimate and moving; the workers become performers and audience, thereby joining us as spectators. This performance acts as a levelling device, essential to the equality of the gaze, where their tacit agreement to be watched by the camera, and us, becomes an active desire.

Throughout Karikis' oeuvre, the machine is never simply mechanistic and dully routinised: work, he insists, helps us live, defines our purpose and bestows dignity. Often, as in *Children of Unquiet* (2014) the industrial plant and equipment become another living, needing body. In *The Chalk Factory*, the soundtrack also builds a sense of purposeful dignity: it blends involuntary sounds of repetitive, self-soothing murmuring, chuckling or humming, with a beating drum, shivery cymbals and the scraping and rattling of factory assembly. John Cage spoke of 'the activity of sound' where no one needs to speak in order to be heard saying something: 'When I hear what we call music, it seems to me that someone is talking. And talking about his feelings, or about his ideas of relationships. But when I hear traffic, the sound of traffic ... I don't have the feeling that anyone is talking. I have the feeling that sound is acting. And I love the activity of sound ... I don't need sound to talk to me.'<sup>3</sup> Karikis brings this sensibility to his sound canvas to humanise and vivify the factory environment.

As well as developing complex soundscapes in his practice, Karikis celebrates the sharp ping and punctuation of colour, from the customized uniforms the children wear in *Children of Unquiet*, which act as bright brushstrokes in the landscape, to the fluorescent orange lobster pots in *SeaWomen*; or the primary palette of blue, green and red shipbuilding tools in *The Endeavour* (2015).



Here Karikis encourages us to see the vibrant magenta and cyan lines of chalk as abstract grids, which suggest the colour-rich aesthetic of artists like Hélio Oiticica and Josef Albers. In the close-ups of the moving yellow and red wheel and the rolling sponges, they become kinetic sculptures. While the angular machines lend linearity to the composition, the shots of splatters of coloured chalk dots on the floor deliver a joyful chromatic chaos that evokes action painting or the aftermath of Holi, the Hindu festival of colour. As Karikis puts it, 'I wanted to make a painting video or paint with video. When you film the world, it's figurative or representational, and I wanted to create and explore abstraction. Usually this is done by fragmentation and close-up, which I often associate with pornography. I wanted something more experiential and immersive.'

The delicate and fragile world of *The Chalk Factory* is disappearing. The future structure of labour for everyone is uncertain as authority shifts to big data algorithms, which determine our 'reliability' based on our digital footprint; employment legislation is being shredded; and countries like the U.K. want to close their borders to all but the super-skilled, despite the demand for workers with lower skills or soft skills.

Theorists like Rosi Braidotti urge for an affirmative ethics, mobilised by the values required to embrace difference, which would also understand our interdependency with environmental and animal vulnerabilities. She reminds us that 'the great emancipatory movements of postmodernity are driven by the emergent "others"', whether they be black, women, LGBT and/or people with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> In this compassionate and serene work, Karikis resists the narrowing prejudices that threaten increasingly to divide and belittle us, and invites us to explore our discriminatory fear.

- 1 Ronaldo V. Wilson, 'Radiant' from *Farther Traveler* (Denver: Counterpath, 2015), p. 76.
- 2 Gertrude Stein, 'Rooms', *Tender Buttons* (1914; Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1990), p. 63.
- 3 John Cage, quoted in John Cage et al, *Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2010), p. 72.
- 4 Rosi Braidotti, quoted in *Art & Activism in the Age of Globalisation*, ed. Lieven De Caeter (Rotterdam: Nai Publications, 2011), p. 269.



