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Forms of Unsiting in Factory Compositions by Leslie Kaplan and Joseph Ponthus

Abstract

Leslie Kaplan's *Excess—The Factory* (1982) and Joseph Ponthus's *On the Line: Notes from a Factory* (2019) are rare poetic depictions of industrial environments. Kaplan dwells on the manufacturing setting as exemplifying overproduction, whereas Ponthus attends to how precarious work in globalized supply chains gives rise to localized pressures. The two from-within stagings of labor offer testimony and resistance in the face of dehumanizing infrastructure by pointing up intensities and ruptures in the margins of everyday capitalist cycles. They thereby demonstrate how poetry can perform a "critical unsiting" of the factory-site. In the light of this concept, our article identifies key aspects of (a) absence, (b) dispersal, and (c) density so as to show how poetic language can spark collective awakening and resistance in the face of dehumanizing conditions.

Keywords

absence; density; dispersal; environmental humanities; France; poetry

Disclosure statement

There are no competing interests to declare.

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What can be learned about industrial modernity around the beginning of the twenty-first century by considering literary texts? This article’s argument is that approaching factory-inspired poems through cultural geography and the environmental humanities can provide significant insights into the human condition. The focus is two French-language poets who took it upon themselves to be part of the working class, namely the American-born Leslie Kaplan (1943–) and the French-born Baptiste Cornet AKA Joseph Ponthus (1978–2021), whose writings—we argue—operate a “critical unsiting” of conceptual and geographical parameters associated with the factory-site. Here, “site” is to be understood in terms of the “importance of the relationship between [...] space and the human,” particularly with respect to “space-in-use” (Hubbell et al. 2023, 113). Close reading can bear considerable fruit to that end, along the lines of Marc Brosseau’s account of “geographers [...] turn[ing] to literature in order to explore its relevance to different points of view: regionalists in search of more vivid description of place; humanists seeking evocative transcriptions of spatial experience; radicals concerned with social justice; [...] discursively-oriented researchers addressing the problems of representation” (1994, 333). Certainly, cultural production resounds with meaning in ways ranging from the sociopolitical to the emotional.

Insofar as poetry provides a distinctive way of understanding how human subjectivity is shaped by reality (Lafaille 1989, 119), all sorts of perspectives on spatial matters are to be found in creations like Kaplan's and Ponthus's. Marie-Laure Ryan, Maoz Azaryahu, and Kenneth E. Foote's *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* emphasizes how "space serves [...] narrative roles: it can be a focus of attention, a bearer of symbolic meaning, an object of emotional investment, [...] a principle of organization" (2016, 1). The material and sentimental attributes of poetically narrativized spaces are perhaps at their starkest when we consider how they bear the marks of capitalism's extractivist logic (Malița and Marcu 2022, i). The factory is in essence a locus of alterities (Reid 2015, 53): on the one hand, subjectivity comes under intense pressure; on the other hand, capitalist processes are distinctly susceptible to contestation.

Doreen Massey observes in *Space, Place and Gender* that "time [...] is typically coded masculine[,] and space, being absence or lack, as feminine" (1994, 6). The industrial era has witnessed "spatial images open[ing] up a dimension of absence, of otherness" (Bauer 2018, 16), owing to the "alienating qualities of abstract capitalist space" (Heino 2021, 3). A proliferation of "non-places" shorn of history and relationality (Augé 1995, 77–78) has culturally reverberated to the point of poetry being marked by topographic placelessness (Finch-Race 2015, 1025). Philosophically speaking, dislocation can be perceived as the preponderant feature of sites where connectedness has broken down (Goetz 2001, 29).

The evolution of diverse cultural practices associated with ideas of "site" is mapped in Miwon Kwon's *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, outlining how "the deterritorialization of the site has produced [...] multiple identities, allegiances, and meanings, based [...] on the nonrational convergences forged by chance encounters and circumstances" (2004, 165). Inspired by the Critical Art Ensemble, Kwon espouses "critical unsiting" as "a way beyond and through the impossibility of community" (2004, 153). This constitutes a practice whereby groups of participants remain critically active in artistic work that is rooted in an understanding of life as "a network of unanchored flows" (Kwon 2004, 164), instead of them being inadvertently reified through inequality-perpetuating images of coherence, as deployed in a number of projects concerned with a language of community. Critical unsiting thus offers a method "past the burden of affirmational siting" (Kwon 2004, 154–155) that allows productive otherness and openness to difference. The criticality of unsiting could be said to manifest in how poetry reconfigures language's affirmative aspect while deploying more uncertain/oppositional forms of utterance. Poets who have to reckon with the impossibility of community in a location such as a factory seem to shift away from coherence/affirmation to "absence, distance, and ruptures" (Kwon 2004, 9), as well as unconventional points of view besides the human.

Kaplan's and Ponthus's poetically recounted factories ought to be approached as a site, rather than (non-)place. As Lytle Shaw observes in *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*, "the status of site-specific poetics in [...] history [...] is *not* simply continuous with the older poetics of place" (2013, 5). The two authors under discussion here—a pair of "intellectuals [...] work[ing] on assembly lines [...] deeply affected by the dehumanizing repetitive labor" (Reid 2004, 87)—operate a critical unsiting that relates to ever more widespread tensions. This is particularly striking in French-language contexts because the term "site," coming from the Latin "situs," is defined as how a place is configured through human use (Hubbell et al. 2023, 113). What, then, is to be made of poetry not only deconstructing the very configuration of place but also expressing the dehumanizing consequences of such a relation?

Industrial work in French poetry

However antithetical to lyricism the trappings of industrial production might seem, factory environments have long proven fertile ground for critical meditation and creative writing (Grenouillet 2014). Of particular note in this regard is Simone Weil's diarization of her factory undertakings in solidarity with the "objectified" working class (Sołonko 2023): her journal and letters from the 1930s—collected in *La condition ouvrière* (1951)—point to language and thought becoming determined by machines and the circulation of products (Taïbi 2006, 75). Experimental poetry in French since World War Two has often had to do with recalibrating language-work, from the constraint-based practices of the Workshop of Potential Literature (OuLiPo) to poets of the 1980s and 2010s like Nathalie Quintane and Franck Leibovici, who put "emphasis on the working of language [...], construing the poem as an artifact" (Barda 2019, 5), following the logic of an "anonymous process" (Game 2011, 4). This has raised the stakes of writing about physical spaces in a material sense as much as a sociocultural one, with tenets of form and content brought under the spotlight in an era of alienation linked to the serializing of various parts of existence.

There is plenty to be gleaned from Kaplan's *Excess—The Factory* (1982) and Ponthus's *On the Line: Notes from a Factory* (2019), not least in terms of how they articulate flows of matter that eclipse any stable relationship to a "site". Our analysis of content and form in these works shall illustrate humanity being redefined within a physically and psychologically overwhelming milieu, with both poets deconstructing capitalist processes of atomization and distortion. The following sections shall show how both texts revolve around three aspects that prove fundamental to a poetics of critical unsiting:

1. absence, based on how the poems convey the difficulty of grasping the nature of an industrial site that in large part seems undifferentiated or empty of significance;
2. dispersal, based on how the poems reveal the functioning of an industrial site according to a principle of unchecked expansion brings about overstretching and breaking into bits;
3. density, based on how the poems express an industrial site composed of materials that get thrust together under a production cycle's constant pressures.

It is worthwhile to consider how the phenomena in question intertwine in a comparative schema before zooming in on each of the three aspects.

Situating Kaplan and Ponthus: toward a grammar of unsiting

Leslie Kaplan's decades of prize-winning outputs display an aptitude for delving into knotty questions of being-in-the-world. First-hand knowledge of "critical unsiting" comes across in her earliest book, *Excess—The Factory* (1982), divided into sections of varied length that constitute nine Circles akin to the structure of Hell in Dante Alighieri's *Comedy* (1320), with a whiff of the likes of Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, and Fraud (Pertile 2019, 10–13). Spurred by Mao Zedong's appeal in 1957 for intellectuals "to serve the working and peasant masses," Kaplan was swept up in a wave of leftist students who chose to work in factories as *établis* (Zancarini-Fournel 2001, 148). Beginning in January 1968, Kaplan undertook jobs in a range of factories producing items like cables, headlights and crackers—she was on hand during that year's occupations. This experience left her acutely critical of how the site's draining nature called all aspects of experience into question (Kaplan 2015, 278–279). On that score, Siham

Bouamer and Sonja Stojanovic's introduction to "*Taking Up Space:*" *Women at Work in Contemporary France* dwells on "the negotiation of liminal and precarious spaces [...] often deemed inhospitable" (2022, 7). It is important to heed Kaplan's interview in 2017 with Julie Carr and Jennifer Pap, who were finalizing the first full English translation of her text: "perhaps the essential thing about writing is the experience of getting more and more into the complexity of the world through the complexity of language, and *with* the complexity of language" (Carr, Pap, and Kaplan 2017, paragraph 32). To be sure, her narrative of factory life is linguistically, observationally and conceptually intense, with a predilection for absence and impersonality. The minimalist text embodies *bare writing* rooted in literality rather than lyrical or metaphorical elaboration (Di Meo and Gleize 2011, paragraph 6), thus epitomizing a tendency in modern French poetry toward stripped-back imagery and language (Gleize 1992).

Joseph Ponthus's only sole-authored book, *On the Line: Notes from a Factory* (2019), performs a critique of routinized industrial labor in a manner akin to Kaplan's text. After a lengthy stint as a support worker for prison inmates and underprivileged youths on the outskirts of Paris, with whom he published the reflective journal *The Suburbs Are Ours* (Ben Bella et al. 2012), he moved for love in the mid-2010s to Lorient on the Breton coast. Unable to find work related to his undergraduate literary studies (in the intellectually prestigious *khâgne*), he ended up precariously employed in grueling industrial settings. *On the Line*'s sixty-six diary-esque fragments of unpunctuated free verse recount a "descent to hell [that] comes with [...] the implacable cadence of twenty-first-century food-processing plants" (Gosetti 2021, 37). The title foregrounds a euphemism promoted by owners seeking to avoid the negative connotations of an assembly line. In the words of Jeremy Lane's *Republican Citizens, Precarious Subjects: Representations of Work in Post-Fordist France*, "low-skilled industrial employment [...] from the 1980s onwards [...] became characterized by the profusion of so-called 'atypical' work contracts" (2020, 5–6). Ponthus's subtitle echoes René Char's *Hypnos: Notes from the French Resistance* (1943–1944), giving the sense that the factory is akin to war in terms of how it drastically reshapes the world, with no going back. This violent theme is furthered by the correlation of abattoir work and the devastation of World War I, colloquially known as the "great slaughter" (Ponthus 2021, 43). On top of this, his visceral representation of high-volume industrial processing is suffused with a mishmash of colloquial and technical vocabulary, pop-culture references and humor. He declares, in contrast to Kaplan: "I wasn't there to report on it | Nor was I readying myself for the revolution" (Ponthus 2021, 1). With Ponthus playing on the parallel between the serializing rhythms of the production unit and units of poetry, interlocked physical and poetic labor is the order of the day. His abattoir tasks are a cornerstone of his vision of the factory: with any and all fat stripped from his text, only muscle remains (Richeux, Traoré, and Ponthus 2019). Substantially blank pages, shorn of superfluous words, are testament to this rendering-down at the intersection of industrial and textual work.

Absences/dispersals/densities

Both *Excess—The Factory* and *On the Line* are attentive to absences that production facilities encompass, not to say generate. In the first instance,

Endlessly space folds and unfolds.
You are not supported, there is nothing between the lines.

The space folds open. [...]
The little lines go in all directions.
You don't know, you can't know. (Kaplan 2018, 40)

This sweeping unboundedness is a psychogeographical phenomenon that finds expression in form and content, with the series of lines seeming almost unmoored in fathomless blank space, akin to flotsam on the ocean. According to Morgane Kieffer's vision of Kaplan as a poet-surveyor, the text's typography—especially the large blank spaces and refrains—expresses an ambition to transmit lived experience by orienting perception toward material realities and minute details (2016, 429). Key to this is her deployment of impersonal forms of reference in place of personalized third- or first-person perspectives, the latter being Ponthus's approach. The recurrent pronoun "you" takes the place of the French third-person-singular pronoun "on," which can translate as "one"/"we"/"people"/"they" or a passive form with no pronoun—a protean quality that can evoke intimacy, embodied in a singular pronoun, or open up more anonymous/collective resonances at a distance from intimacy. Her technique thus downplays subjective experience, instead gesturing toward an anonymous collective frame of reference. In this way, the narrative is inflected by factory architecture lacking sufficient reference points for a full grounding of experience in individual terms. The prominence of "endlessly" at the beginning of the line augments the impact of the repetition of "space" and "folds," prefiguring Gilles Deleuze's spatiotemporal reflections in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* where it is a case of "a Difference that endlessly unfolds and folds over from each of its two sides [...] in a coextensive unveiling and veiling of Being, of presence and of withdrawal of being" (1993, 30). In relation to Kaplan's "nothing between the lines," blank space has an accentuating force that ratchets up in the encounter with "little lines go[ing] in all directions." Comparable to Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* of "lines of flight" (1987, 3), Kaplan's horizon of innumerable vectors verges on overwhelming. The repetition of "know" in quick succession, each time negated, is another spasm of privation. *On the Line* evokes a comparably desolating context:

The factory is
Above all else
A relationship with time
Time that passes
That doesn't pass. (Ponthus 2021, 129)

Ineffability is accentuated in disjointed sentences across lines without a single punctuation mark. As opposed to spatiality defined by physical markers, the narrative signals the rule of what Tim Ingold calls "the clock time of activities in the workplace" (1995, 17). The emphasis on "time" in consecutive lines sets up the agonized interplay of "passes" and "doesn't pass," epitomizing replication in the domain of *factory time*, where human decency receives short shrift. Ponthus thus sets his empirical experience of precarious labor within the sweep of capitalism doing violence to the working class in particular (Simonini 2021, 7). In a space characterized by deficiencies, the brutal reality of time being "out of joint" is practically the height of ungraspability.

A second commonality between the two texts is the phenomenon of dispersal. Heavy industry's spreading-out and splitting-up nature is at the root of *Excess—The Factory*:

You go to a factory that makes headlights. [...]

The factory is very big, in many pieces.

Disarticulated and full, the factory. (Kaplan 2018, 47)

This space is a nexus of tensions somewhere between a vast assemblage and a “black hole” with a gravitational field at the level of content and form: “factory” shuttles from the indefinite to definite article and is placed at a range of points in consecutive lines, including in apposition. The various components required for a headlight are akin to the establishment’s “many pieces,” which are especially imposing when “disarticulated.” Blank spacing between single-sentence lines reinforces the scattered dimensions of the infrastructural complex, set to bring territories under its exponentially consuming sway. Evidently, “the poem is intended [...] as a critique of [...] capitalism” (Ashton 2021, 16), as is the case in *On the Line*. The evocation of meat-processing revolves around analogous disintegration to do with flows of bitty materials:

You disappear beneath the dead animals being processed
A mound of bones of offal
Of flesh
Of blood. (Ponthus 2021, 210)

Workers and livestock are reduced to substances that are less and less distinguishable, with broad biophysical categories taking the place of specific identities—so much grist to the capitalist mill. The sundering of animal bodies has a grotesquely merciless bent that is underscored by “of” occurring four times, with the monosyllabic nouns in the two-word lines hitting hard. As for humans being ground down into featureless cogs in a ravenous machine, “*On the Line* is [...] an unrelenting account of what the industrialization of the food industry produces: monotony, exhaustion, a soul-altering deadening of affect” (Davies 2022, 8). Every line operator is all too prone to disappear under the pressures of the system’s atomizing methods.

Density is a third concern spanning both compositions, insofar as a concreteness of *stuff* often rears its head. Kaplan’s idea of writing having to rise to the challenge of densifying reality (Bikialo and Kaplan 2013, 41) finds expression in her narrative through the representation of an array of solids in particular:

Fragile papered walls. Corners curling and torn. Blood maybe, some bolts. Empty mass of the factory, the corridors are long and full.

You pass into the light carcass, thin and suspended, of the factory.
You are in matter that expands, fat matter, plastic and stiff. (Kaplan 2018, 99)

Moving from paper to plastic by way of bolts, the narrative is symptomatic of “an era both overwhelmed by the proliferation of things and singularly attentive to them” (Brown 2001, 4 and 14). Owing to lengthy aggregates of short phrases interwoven with wave-like lines featuring apposition, the site’s rather rickety construction is front and center. Thanks to the dilapidated wallpaper and the uncertainty over the presence of blood, the factory’s physical and social minutiae are staked out, thereby paving the way for the wide-angle treatment of the building’s peculiar architectural properties—a hotchpotch of lightness and rigidity, with something of the gargantuan. Effectively, “the temporal reference point remains vague, while the material objects of the factory, as well as its spatial dimensions, are emphasised” (Gjesdal 2015, 270). In contrast to Kaplan’s rendering of uncanny weightlessness and thinness, *On the Line* swings from burden to burden:

Everything is so heavy
The cows
My body

The work
 My life no less
 It all weighs so heavily in this place that doesn't change
 Will never change. (Ponthus 2021, 163)

Concerted enumeration without conjunctions brings out the situation's onerousness, stretching from the corporeal to the existential. Not only does the prompt echoing of "heavy" in "heavily" underscore a crushing totality; there is also breakneck switching between externality and internality where the two definite articles rub up against the two possessives in four fleeting lines. Indeed, the convulsive rhythm has a flavor of the infernal (Pierret 2019, paragraph 2). As any possibility of improvement is definitively negated via the future tense superseding the present, the milieu's physical intensity is brought into ever sharper relief.

Unsitng via absence: spatial ungraspability

The two authors return again and again to the issue of something lacking. In *Excess—The Factory*, this is apparent right from the off:

The great factory, the universe, the one that breathes for you.
 There's no other air but what it pumps, expels.
 You are inside.

All space is occupied: all has become waste. [...]

You move between formless walls. [...] You move indefinitely, outside of time. No beginning, no end. Things exist together, all at once.

[...]

You are inside, in the factory, the universe, the one that breathes for you. (Kaplan 2018, 13)

This opening vignette's repetitive phrasing makes plain that the facility's emptiness is deranging, to the point of it feeling like a micro-cosmos swallowing up space and time. Insufficiency pervades the scene due to the negative terms running from "no other air" to "no beginning, no end," including "formless" and "indefinitely," as well as the basic life-support function of the site "breath[ing] for you." Epitomizing Kaplan's contestation of the *new normal* (Trudel 2022, 188), the narrative conveys an emptying-out of experience under heavy industry. Given the frequency of "all," no corner of life appears unaffected. *On the Line*'s opening pages are of the same bent:

Uncompromising existential radical
 Greek sanctuaries
 Prisons
 Islands
 And the factory
 When you leave them
 You never know if you are returning to the real world or leaving it behind
 [...]
 You don't leave a sanctuary untouched
 You don't ever really leave the slammer

You don't leave an island without a sigh
 You don't leave the factory without looking up to the sky. (Ponthus 2021, 7)

The trio of adjectives weighs heavily on the set of sites occupying single lines in turn, together running a gamut from religious to carceral isolation. In this spectrum of partitioned experiences, the factory seems to lie in the middle as a locale mixing the positive and negative. Redolent of “urban creep” (Smith, Cavan, and Lindley 2015, 271), the industrial setting muddles reference points, leading to uncertainty over what constitutes “the real world.” When it comes to “you don't,” the fourfold litany indicates *subtractive* unsiting. Extremes of isolation come to exercise an “absent presence” (Hetherington 2004, 163) that thenceforth shapes understanding of the world.

Undifferentiation is ingrained in the writings of Kaplan and Ponthus. *Excess—The Factory* depicts severe aimlessness: “you wander in places without names, courtyards, corners, warehouses” (Kaplan 2018, 17). In a sphere governed by norms of efficiency, the profusion of anonymous spaces inhibits any sort of rapport with the site. Non-naming entails defamiliarization, which is one of the most intense manifestations of a critical unsiting at work. It is patent that Kaplan has a flair for poeticizing the alienness of the industrial and the corporate (Lefort-Favreau 2015, 55), not least where locales exist primarily to contain things and people, rather than having their own distinctiveness. In *On the Line*, the overaccumulation of names is fundamental to this poetics: “the smoke from the factory at Clohars-Carnoët is the same as the smoke in Lorient in Priziac or in Chicago or the fire of Billancourt” (Ponthus 2021, 175). Extending from Brittany to Illinois via Paris's suburbs, the five urban coordinates highlight a globalization-induced flattening of particularities across regions at a remove from one another. The juxtaposition of fumes from the north of France and the United States is also evocative of the Global North contributing disproportionately to the climate crisis through air pollution.

The catalog of deficiencies is rounded out by ungraspability. As far as the earlier of the two compositions is concerned, prospects for understanding are routinely denied: “the other workshops, you don't know them” (Kaplan 2018, 101). When there is no possibility for connecting the dots between locations or people, atomization is at its worst. Because spatial mechanics are so vague, with “them” remaining unspecified in scope, the aura of irreducible otherness hangs heavy. For Jennifer Pap, Kaplan's handling of making-unmaking-circulating “runs counter to the thrust of production [...] with a poetry of impoverishment, a subtraction of subjectivity, a floating and uncertain perception [...]. Something has been unmade” (2015, 573). *On the Line*'s last words impart subtractive being, too:

There is the fact that I must put this final full stop
 To the line
 And return

[...]

There is the fact that there will never be

Any
 Final full stop
 On the line. (Ponthus 2021, 241)

The act of drawing the book to a close is overshadowed by the unstoppable machinery, with poetry's representational finitude counterpoising the facility's ostensible illimitation. To all

intents and purposes, the echo of “there is the fact that”/“final full stop”/“the line” sees the mechanical supersede the personal. Each blank space and open-ended line following “there will never be” epitomizes a force sweeping inexorably onward, particularly in the case of “any” on its own line, as if the very essence of creative expression is warped by the conveyor belt’s drag.

Unsitng via dispersal: expanding to the breaking point

In both compositions, unchecked expansion is conspicuous. With respect to *Excess—The Factory*, the facility has a totalizing spread: “all this space, all around, curved. The factory is vast” (Kaplan 2018, 27). From the two instances of “all” to the smothering ramifications of “around, curved,” a spilling-out motion is at play. So diffuse are the premises that it is impossible to rationalize their dimensions, leading to an impression of immensity. Matthieu Rémy observes, in fact, that the facility generates a wholesale alteration in spatial perception (2016, 82). *On the Line* likewise lays out singularities getting absorbed into a swelling non-place:

The factory has taken me
[...]
Small-time casual worker that I am
One among so many others. (Ponthus 2021, 3)

The abrupt lines transmit reduced self-worth as part of an uncountable legion, distributed according to the needs of the machine. Triggered by the pressures of precarious labor, the diminishment of individuality is a manifestation of “the seeds of dissolution of the self [...] beg[inning] to sprout” (Barresi and Martin 2011, 50). With the phrasing of the factory as subject and the human figure as object, the infrastructural is ascribed overpowering agency.

Throughout the pair of works, there is an insistence on bittiness. Strewn fragments come to the fore in the midst of *Excess—The Factory*:

Weightless carcass, disarticulated and full,
being there, in the courtyard, it is there, the factory.

Parts, scraps and life, the factory.
And brick and tile. And in and out.
And right and left and brick and tile and soft and fat and turn and turn and life and life
and wood and nail and iron and iron and in and out and turn and noise.

Never a cry. The factory.

Parts scraps and life, the factory, and iron and iron and life and life and brick and tile
and in and out and life and life and nail and nail. (Kaplan 2018, 51)

Disarticulation is striking in this mix of lines featuring multiple commas/periods and long unpunctuated phrases littered with “and,” plus varied stanza sizing. Owing to the repetition of “there” and “the factory” in particular, the manufacturing assemblage comes across as spatially and emotively omnipresent. The two iterations of “parts”/“scraps,” for their part, amplify a disintegrated nature somewhere between the planned and haphazard. Each mention of “brick and tile”/“wood and nail”/“iron” adds to the scrappiness, as the building’s architecture is split into base elements rather than the outcome of construction. Following Christine Dupouy’s

sense of the philosophical leanings of place-sensitive poets (2006, 26), it stands to reason that there is significant weight to “life” occurring twice in a 36-word string and five times in a 30-word string just a few lines apart. This creeping “‘factoryization’ of humans” (Jackson and Carter 2007, 150) becomes ever starker in the course of the brusque iterations of “in and out”/“right and left”/“turn” that bear witness to an industrial synchronization of motion over and above personal will. A practically identical condition is glaring in *On the Line*:

The factory is wreaking havoc with my body
 My convictions
 All I thought I knew of work and rest
 Of weariness
 Of joy
 Of humanity. (Ponthus 2021, 140)

Given the syntax of the factory-subject acting on the body-object, infrastructural agency is drastically staked out. An acute sensation of capitalism outstripping its human origins is heightened by the possessives and pronouns in the first-person singular, coming to a head in the moment of “I thought I knew” where expectations have gone out the window. The three consecutive lines beginning with “of” highlight things taken for granted as “solid”—from physical and emotional states to species-being—ending up “melt[ing] into air” (Marx and Engels 1888, 16).

Breaking-down is common to the narratives of both Kaplan and Ponthus. The first of the two delivers up a macro-scale panorama:

The factory is there.

 Spread out fragment, detached and alive.
 Huge and powerful fragment, free.

 Separate and massive, the factory moves.

You look. Full life, facing you. It’s there. The forms are made. (Kaplan 2018, 96)

Due to the recurrence of “there” and the lexical similarity of “huge”/“massive,” the facility has a saturating character beyond the immediate field of perception. The terse formulation of it being “powerful” and “full” is redolent of overwhelming bulk, credited with the capacity to move and create forms on its own account. As Charity Scribner says in *Requiem for Communism*, “Kaplan brings literary practice to a limit, and puts the industrial workspace into the order of [...] sites of trauma that define our moment: writing must ‘go through’ the factory” (2003, 71). A traumatic limit is tangible in the cognates revolving around scattering—“spread out,” “detached,” “free,” “separate”—that compound the appearance of “fragment” in consecutive lines. *On the Line* deals with the micro-scale of personal collapse linked to the factory’s unstopability: “you just watch the belt relentlessly advance your anxiety rising in the face of the inevitability of the machine and you’re forced to keep processing no matter what” (Ponthus 2021, 174–175). One extreme leads to another, as the unceasing conveyor belt pushes coping abilities to the edge. This breaking point is laid bare by the permeability of the unpunctuated 28-word phrase, which gives rise to the semblance of an imperative in the background: “watch the belt relentlessly advance your anxiety.” The production line can thus be taken as the active subject exacerbating the psychological unrest of the worker as object.

Unsitng via density: (in)organic materialities

Kaplan and Ponthus share a fixation with material/processual constants. *Excess—The Factory* paints a picture of immutable substances and perpetual motion:

It's there, entire, parts and scraps. The factory. There's no direction, it turns. And rises and falls to the right and to the left, of sheet metal of brick and of stone and the factory. And sound and noise. No crying out. The factory. Parts and scraps. Nails and nails. Sheet metal, understand? Soft and fat. Smooth and hard. (Kaplan 2018, 19)

Cutting from “brick” and “stone” to “nails and nails” in a mélange of long and short phrases, the narrative magnifies units of building-blocks that give a “thickness” to the non-place. Ductile construction supplies are underscored in the reprise of “sheet metal” with a rhetorical question tag, doubling down on its fixity. Julie Carr and Jennifer Pap attend to these details in their translators’ afterword: “with the desire, or with the ethical summons, to write about an alienating and often hidden place in society, [...] Kaplan’s poetic voice circulates through the factory with its heaps of wire, sheet metal, its assembly line rhythms, and its open yards” (2018, 115). Indeed, accounting for the trappings of an alienating space has an ethical dimension, not least because its mass—disorientingly “soft and fat” yet “smooth and hard”—is a source of harm, especially psychologically. *On the Line* similarly brings up sensory overload:

Our massive production lines
Machine after machine
Where the prawns are
Defrosted
Sorted
Cooked
Refrigerated
Re-sorted
Packaged
Labelled
Re-re-sorted
Gaping metal bellies
Each with its own name
Coaxial
Ishida
Multivac
Arbor
Bizerba
Each with its specific function. (Ponthus 2021, 9–10)

This listing of eight behaviors and five contraptions points to a no-holds-barred milieu of “machine after machine,” as emphasized by the apposition. The clutch of past participles and proper nouns in a narrow column of single-item lines is evocative of an audit checklist, with blank space reinforcing the implication of nothing having value beyond these points. Besides the hemming-in iterations of “each with its,” the interspersal of “sorted”/“re-sorted”/“re-re-sorted” at three-line intervals exudes unforgiving cyclicality in the crustacean handling. Then, the whistle-stop inventory of multinational corporations—“Ishida | Multivac | Arbor | Bizerba”—bungs together Japanese, Italian, American, and German technologies in a linguistic and cultural hotchpotch, line after punchy line.

Shabbiness in the factory's most humdrum features is a fount of revulsion throughout the two collections. The earlier depiction comprises a descent into hell befitting the industrial era:

You go down the big curved staircase, you go to the basement.

The stalls are bare, cement.

The place is massive, you enter.

The cement is moist, one would say it was mud. Poured cement, you feel it.
Matter is really strong.

The walls are wide, damp.

Sick water on the walls, you don't like it. (Kaplan 2018, 30)

These subterranean margins tell a story of something sufficiently "massive" that it exerts a "really strong" presence even in the depths of neglect. The materialization of "walls" twice and "cement" three times is symptomatic of a problematic economics of enclosure and concreting-over. Kaplan's writing is at a peak of communicating *truly* (Trudel 2020, 176) when it comes to the disgust-inducing "sick water" that is prominent at the start of the line. Clusters of analogously grotty features bespatter *On the Line*: "that endless neon night of wanly illuminated white-tiled walls and stainless-steel tables and conveyor belts and god-awful brown floors" (Ponthus 2021, 175). The enumeration of the premises' ills is extensive, rhythmized around three occurrences of "and." Color is a major issue, with the starkly commercial tones of the walls and floors intensifying the aura of alienation. As opposed to good design principles (Küller et al. 2006, 1505), the glow of gas-discharge lamps has a disconcerting measure of lumens.

Both books weigh up the organic versus the non-organic, primarily in solid and liquid states. *Excess—The Factory* ponders the metallic:

The staircase is iron, fragile.

[...]

The staircase is fragile. Iron, how wretched. (Kaplan 2018, 52)

Quasi-replication within a short interval brings a mundane architectural feature into the spotlight. This is exemplary of Kaplan heeding everyday minutiae, right down to inert forms (Kieffer 2017, 152). Flimsiness in what can be termed the building's "connective tissue" (Van Wynsberghe, Noback, and Carola 1995, 116) is indicative of management not investing in upkeep, thus putting workers' health and safety at risk. The presence of iron rather than a more robust alloy is accentuated by the weary exclamation about the metal's cheapness. *On the Line* abounds with grisly biochemical connective tissue containing iron:

Abattoir cleaner

[...]

It's as if I'm at war

The scraps the fragments the equipment you need the blood

The blood the blood the blood. (Ponthus 2021, 112)

The glut of mammalian gore could scarcely be starker, with four utterances of “the blood” signaling mental and physical exhaustion. Incapacitating trauma is palpable in the idea of being “at war,” which feels as much to do with the slaughterhouse’s implacable rhythms as its bloodiness. Because of the absence of punctuation in the ten-word line, it is possible to perceive a phrase in the shadows, “you need the blood,” hinting at the capitalist system’s dependence-inducing characteristics.

Conclusion: poetic unsiting as resistance

This article’s reflections on the machine-dictated parcellation of existence took inspiration from the concept of critical unsiting associated with “specific circumstances instigated by an [...] institution” where “a coherent representation of [...] identity is always out of grasp” (Kwon 2004, 154–155). The examples of absence, dispersal and density here indicate the degree to which large-scale manmade apparatus establishes the conditions for an erasure of human agency, seeing as even a crucial part of a repetitive process can appear futile. Once dehumanization occurs, the very concept of “site” crumbles because its constitutive relationship with the human is not possible. It is clear from the close readings that poetry’s special resonances have the potential to move beyond a regime of rationalized production. To all intents and purposes, poetry does not place the intensity of language in service of other ends, unlike narrative being about telling a story, or argumentation having to do with persuasion (Bailly 2020, 60). The sparse factory compositions by Kaplan and Ponthus—their crafting of lived experience into lines with distinctive topographies and rhythms—are an act of witnessing that denounces industrial overload through an “underloading” of textual space. Such textual de- and re-assembly of a site establishes a kind of resistance whereby an unsung human element appropriates the means to influence others’ stance on the environment. Taking forward the potential for “poetically assembl[ing] a space that eludes the endless proliferation of value in the factory” (Pap 2015, 570), *Excess—The Factory* and *On the Line* show how poetic language performs a critical unsiting that is not just a coming-apart but also a coming-together of more aware individuals *because of* and *in spite of* their context. In this way, poetic language—sometimes deemed to be at a remove from the workings of the everyday—can spur an awakening to possibilities for action rooted in solidarity. The two subversive concoctions shuttling between lists and blank spaces offer razor-sharp insights into what it means to be human together in a space where circumstances might seem to render solidarity nigh impossible. In essence, each text highlights the possibility of “reconciling what the social division of labour within capitalism has separated” (Fournier 2013, 450). Going above and beyond “the thick air” (Kaplan 2018, 56) resounding with “the noise of the machines” (Ponthus 2021, 172), the authors sound a clarion call for standing up to dehumanizing systems.

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