

Bataville

Tate Auditorium

Late at Tate

Friday 1 July 2005

In a world where ‘value for money’ and velocity are increasingly prominent, what once made the bread and butter of Britain is silently disappearing. British factories and workers – both endangered species – are rarely celebrated by our politicians and public figures. But luckily, artists Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope are at work to remind us of the fragility of our industrial heritage. Last year, they embarked on a bus pilgrimage to the Bata shoemaker’s headquarters in the Czech town of Zlin. The film ‘Bata-ville: We are not afraid of the future’ shown as part of the Late at Tate programme is the story of their peregrination. Acting as tour agency hostesses, they took with them a group of 40 people, composed of ex-Bata workers and of a handful of art enthusiasts.

Their journey started with the picking up of the ex-workers at the sites of the now closed UK factories, respectively Maryport in Cumbria and East Tilbury in the Thames Eastuary. Their transport, a bright yellow bus, is marked with the phrase ‘We are not afraid of the future’, a leitmotiv of Tomas Bata, the founder of the Bata company. Described as a ‘man with a vision’, the charismatic and business-savvy Bata devoted his life to the set up of what was to become a major player in the shoe industry. When he opened the first factory in 1894, he completely transformed the town of Zlin. Eager to provide his workers with high living standards, Bata built a new town comprising green spaces, local shops and leisure facilities. This progressive model of township was to be repeated at other factory sites. By the mid-1930’s, the Bata Empire had expanded to 30 countries and was under the control of Bata Junior, following the death of Bata Senior in a plane crash.

After crossing the Channel, the crew stops at a sister factory in Holland, where they are given a tour of the shoe manufacturing line. This triggers an outpouring of emotion, as the former employees are faced with the reality of today's production methods. They reminisce upon the years when their numbers exceeded those of the machines. We all know of the consequences of mechanisation but this testimony is poignant as it confronts us with people's feelings rather than mere facts. We are struck by the sheer devotion of the employees to the Bata Company. Back on the bus, the emotion of the day before is lightened by an unconventional 'egg' game, a creative bunting workshop, and a series of speeches. Throughout the journey, Guthrie and Pope – wearing a 1950's hostess outfits – act the part, guiding and interrogating their fellow travellers during what seems to be a rite of passage. "Are you afraid of the future?" they relentlessly ask their passengers.

Upon their arrival, the duo is startled at how much Zlin resembles the illustration they had seen of it. The utopian city is set in a green valley, where buildings alternate with trees. It's so picturesque that it looks as though it has been taken from a children's book. Everything here breathes Bata including the hotel the travellers are staying at. The following days are spent visiting the city and marvelling at its infrastructure: the aircraft factory, the shoe museum and the cemetery. The artists ask the same question "Are you afraid of the future?" to whomever they meet. A party is held at the Bata Foundation, where Bata Junior's birthday is celebrated in his absence. The buntings, which were made and decorated on the bus, are up. Some of the travellers are singing and playing music, in order to 'give something back to the group'. We learned through the video diaries that this trip has enabled some of them to be themselves and reflect on their shared history.

Before going back, Guthrie and Pope meet Bata Junior. At 96 years of age, the mythic figure struggles to deliver a satisfying word of wisdom to the camera. As he

re-iterates another of his father's leitmotifs "Work collectively, live individually", the formula wears out. And so does the concept and vision of the Bata Empire. As fascinating as the story of its development is, we feel that the initial spirit of its creation is long gone. It's time to fast forward to today's reality and invent new ways of facing the future. In their documentary, Pope and Guthrie suggest their own way forward. They brought together workers of two factory sites and a group of what they call "others" on what for some of them would be their first trip abroad. By the end of the film, it seems that the initial antagonism and prejudice have gone. The bonding between these disparate groups sharing their games and stories suggest a new utopian mantra " Work individually, live collectively". Hearing this little voice, as I am sitting in the bastion of high culture, at Tate Britain, leaves me pondering whether I have experienced a performance, a documentary, a social experiment, a travel log or just a good old-fashioned work of contemporary art.

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