Alfredo Jaar
La cordillera de los Andes (CB)

Philip Ursprung

The portrayal of work is one of the major challenges of modern visual culture. Indeed, the whole epoch seems to have been subjected to a kind of image ban. Joseph Paxton was the first to erect a boarded-up fence so that no one could see the construction workers building the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition in 1851. The first film in history, *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon,* made by the brothers Lumière in 1895, shows workers streaming out through the factory gates onto the street after finishing work. Yet the camera is denied a glimpse inside the factory. And Auguste Rodin's design for a monument to labor that would have competed with the Eiffel Tower for attention at the Paris world exhibition in 1900 was never realized, although had it been, it would have burst the bubble of the spectacle of consumption that the exhibition produced.

Art simply seems to have found no adequate way of portraying work. Either it is raised to the exaggerated status of a heroic activity, as in the visual language of Socialist Realism, or it is comically distorted, as in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times,* or else it is pathologized as in the nineteenth-century tradition of Naturalism. One reason why it is so difficult to portray work properly in visual art may be that this would, so to speak, duplicate real exploitation in aesthetic exploitation—the commodification of the working subject in the image. Another reason may be that no iconography exists that would do justice to the inner contradiction of labor. To make something aesthetic is to ignore the exploitative aspect, while a pathological representation is blind to the fulfilment that most people derive from work if it is performed under proper conditions.

Alfredo Jaar's work refers back to photographs that he took in the nineteen-eighties of Clotario Blest (1899–1990), the legendary Chilean trade-unionist, whose international reputation allowed him to withstand the oppression of the dictatorship. Jaar treats him like a model, having him pose for the camera in profile, face on, or lying stretched out on the floor. By offering the viewer various views of his model, Jaar avoids making the portrait heroic. Rather than being stylized as an icon, Blest is allowed to stage himself as a performer and to show that he is aware of his role—and of the impact he has. At the same time the artist's intention is not to critically deconstruct the myth that has given hope to generations of

workers; rather, by comparing Clotario Blest with the Andes—a stylized range of mountains built of neon tubes forms the background to the installation, and the title makes the Andes a synonym for the name of the trade unionist—he takes seriously the process of naturalization by which Blest over the course of decades became a figure with whom to identify. The trade unionist thus becomes an irreducible component in an intellectual landscape, just as the Andes have become an integral part of the urban landscape of Santiago de Chile.

Jaar accepts the cult status that Blest has assumed in the collective imagination. Visitors are invited to take a copy of the poster with a portrait of the trade unionist home with them. (Some may be reminded of the installation by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who introduced the carryout poster to the art world.) But at the same time Jaar brings the fragile body of the old man into view and shows that here we have a man who is vulnerable, mortal, and weary after all the work he has done—just like the rest of us. What politician—one might ask, taking the theme of Jaar's work a step further—would lie down on the floor in front of the camera like that? Who can afford to play so generously with his own image? Who would put themselves into the hands of an artist without thinking twice about it? And who has preserved such personal integrity that even at a ripe old age he can still look at himself in the mirror?