



## Volvo moments

Downloaded from: <https://research.chalmers.se>, 2019-05-25 01:30 UTC

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Palmås, K. (2018)

Volvo moments

Io Squaderno(50): 23-25

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

# Volvo moments

**Karl Palmås**

## 1. Gillick's experimental factory

A minimalist office space, a computer monitor resting atop a white desk. The screen of the monitor displays a 3D CAD model of a factory. As viewers, we learn that this is the sausage factory that forms the set of *Tout va bien*, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's 1972 examination of the stakes and stakeholders of a worker struggle. In a recorded phone message, a rambling, barely audible voice outlines the underlying premises of a film in the making:

... maybe it's that Volvo moment, 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1974, for example? Where the view from the factory is of the trees, and we're thinking hard about the way to work together as a team and working on a way to know that the future is going to work out just fine, and find that everything is a trajectory. That's one choice, OK? Trying to catch that moment, the idea of catching the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1974. Or repression, on the other hand – the idea of creating the conditions for the experimental, but no experiment. That's another possibility.

In this scene from Liam Gillick's short film *Everything good goes* (2008), "that Volvo moment" points back towards a specific point in recent history – that of the establishing of a new post-Fordist utopia, in the form of a Scandinavian car manufacturing facility. This moment looms large in Gillick's overall project, which can be construed as a genealogical interrogation of the contemporary art (Gillick, 2016: xiii), in a time of post-utopianism (Gillick, 2006: 278). The concept of "the Volvo moment" references the actual Volvo Car Company's endeavors to build so-called "humanized production" plants, first in the city of Kalmar, then in the city of Uddevalla. In those two plants, the Fordist assembly line was abandoned, and instead, workers operated in teams, collaborating through the full assembly of the car, with a considerably widened scope for self-management. For present-day production engineers and organizational scholars, this experiment is construed as a closed chapter in manufacturing history. Twenty years after its highly publicized founding moment, the Kalmar plant was shut down in 1994. Since then, the utopian experiment is considered a failure. From the nineties onwards, production engineers have instead searched for inspiration from Japanese "lean production", in part due to the publication of *The Machine That Changed the World* (Womack, Jones & Roos, 1990).

Gillick, however, lingers on this Volvo moment, letting it inform his art practice, partly through the "constantly reworked 'potential text'" (Lüttiken, 2009) titled *Construcción de Uno*. In it, he sketches a situation in which the workers at an unnamed Scandinavian car manufacturer are made redundant. These workers return to the humanized factory the following day, with the ambition of collaboratively come up with ways to rationalize all forms of human exchange. In a later text, Gillick (2016: 107) notes the irony of the actual Volvo case: "What happened at Volvo was that people ended up creating more and more free time, and during that free time they talked about ways to work faster".

Karl Palmås is associate professor at the Science, Technology and Society division at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden. He is currently working on a book about design theory and political realism, and finalising a short film about architecture and political imaginaries.

[karl.palmas@chalmers.se](mailto:karl.palmas@chalmers.se)

From this, he abstracts the notion of the “experimental factory” as shorthand for the present mode of (artistic) production. In the experimental factory, the present state of status quo is managed through *repression* – a logic in which inventiveness is nominally celebrated, while actual invention is curtailed. The experimental factory is a place where there are conditions for the experimental, but no actual experiments.

Although Volvo’s original “humanized production” facilities have been dismantled, the “diagram” of what Gillick calls the experimental factory seems to loom large over current programs for shaping the built environment in the wealthy global North. Indeed, the current “laboratory urbanist” tendency (Eriksson & Palmås, 2016), in which every nook and cranny of the built environment has become a “smart” “living lab”, seems to be characterized by the fact that radical social experiments seem to not take place. What’s more, these emerging laboratorified landscapes not only seem to be dogged by Gillickian repression – again, the idea of creating conditions for the experimental, but no actual experiments – but also the by what he terms *suspension*. In this mode of managing the status quo, the present is constantly projected into the future; an act that perpetually displaces and suspends the critical moment of change. Suspension implies being in a state of “just-around-the-cornerness”, which is simultaneously “an infinite suspension of critical moments” (Gillick, 2009).

## **2. Volvo’s Kalmar plant**

But what about the original Volvo Kalmar plant, the one that serves as a node in Gillick’s genealogy – what caused it to shut down? Contrary to what one may expect, this closure was not due to under-performance, or to a disregard for the standard metrics for evaluating performance. As evidenced by Volvo’s (1974) own promotional material for the plant, it was set up precisely in order to demonstrate that humanized production could match the profitability, productivity and quality levels of traditional line assembly. In a sense, there was a promise made: Numbers would have clear and direct consequences. If the numbers are on your side, you win the argument. Measurement trumps human power battles. This was not merely a naïve hope – there were previous examples of the automotive industry being shaken up by the power of numerical abstraction. The most famous example is probably Robert McNamara’s restoration of the failing Ford Motor Company, using the numerical methods of management that he had previously used in the US Army Air Force “Stat Control Command”. (Byrne, 1993)

Hardly surprisingly, in the debate that surrounded the 1994 closure of the plant, workers, unions, and academic production specialists all emphasized that the Kalmar facility had in fact met these performance criteria. Instead, the corporate management cited consolidation and economies of scale as the motivation for its decision to shut down the experiment and move production to the line assembly plant in Gothenburg. Here, the internal politics of the corporation played a crucial role: The new Volvo management did not believe in the project to re-invent work, or in the proposition that Volvo should break new ground in this field. Moreover, the management of the Gothenburg-based corporation tended to favor the plant situated next to the headquarters. External politics also played its part. During the period of the early Seventies on to the early Nineties, the wider politico-economic framework of the Swedish welfare model had been restructured. The state support for worker-friendly innovations in production had waned. (Palmås, 2005)

Still, something else was going on in this process. As pointed out by Gillick (2016: 107), even though the reversion back to line assembly was “not more efficient in pure capitalist terms”, it at least “reclarified” the relations of production. So, in other words, this is one of the instances in which the social scientist can safely re-state the role of class struggle in the making of history. Or, for that matter, an instance in which to ask oneself the first question of politics: “Who whom?” – that is, “Who does what to whom?” (Geuss, 2008) Metrics, numbers, abstraction proved less influential than the brash struggle for control over the means of production. This argument can be extended when reviewing

the top management's motivation to engage in humanizing production. The then-CEO, Pehr G. Gyllenhammar, was stating his case in relation to the social unrest of the late Sixties and early Seventies, and a perceived loss of interest in car manufacturing from the new generation of potential workers. As such, it can be seen as a concession to radicalized potential workers – or, as some would have it, as a means to fashion himself as a statesman, whose final aim was the takeover of the political mainstream. Tellingly, the project to humanize production was abandoned by Gyllenhammar's successor and nemesis, after he had been forced out of the company.

There are clear parallels here with the current debate on the Malm's (2016) fossil capital thesis – Is the shift towards the use of fossil fuels to be explained as process of economizing and calculation, or is it to be explained as an outcome of the vicissitudes of class struggle? In the

*“That Volvo moment” points back towards a specific point in recent history – that of the establishing of a new post-Fordist utopia, in the form of a Scandinavian car manufacturing facility*

case of the Volvo Kalmar plant, it seems evident that it was a project whose failure did not stem from a failure to measure performance. It failed *despite* it being subsumed by the regime of measurement. Indeed, this whole episode in the history of industrial relations can be read as one in which the actual Kalmar plant – not only Gillick's version, outlined in *Construcción de Uno* – ended up becoming an experimental factory. The promise that measurement would have direct effects, that numbers trump human power-games, turned out to be a false one. In hindsight, there was nothing at stake in this experiment.

### 3. Tout va bien?

Some twenty five years after the demise of the Kalmar plant, we remain in a post-utopian state of suspension, this time projecting our hopes into the future of humanized automation. Lured by the just-around-the-cornerness of a Fully Automated Luxury Communism (Bastani, 2019) that promises abundance and wealth, we must ask: Will measurement be on our side this time around? If so, will it trump struggles for power?

#### References

- Bastani, A. (2019) *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A manifesto*. London: Verso.
- Byrne, J.A. (1993) *The Whiz Kids: The Founding Fathers of American Business – and the Legacy they Left Us*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Eriksson, M. & K. Palmås (2016) 'Laboratory urbanism in Schladming', in Frichot, Gabriëlsson & Metzger (Eds.) *Deleuze and the City*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Geuss, R. (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.
- Gillick, L. (2006) *Proxemics: Selected writings (1988-2006)*. Zürich: JRP Ringier.
- Gillick, L. (2008) *Everything good goes*. Short film, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. <https://vimeo.com/15003105>
- Gillick, L. (2009) Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three? *The Discursive. e-flux*, 1.
- Gillick, L. (2016) *Industry and Intelligence: Contemporary art since 1820*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lüttken, S. (2009) '(Stop) making sense!'. In Szewczyk (Ed.) *Meaning Liam Gillick*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Malm, A. (2016) *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. London: Verso.
- Palmås, K. (2005) *ReVolutions: Innovation, politics and the Swedish brand*. Doctoral dissertation. Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Volvo Car Corporation (1974) *Volvo Kalmar*, promotional film. <https://youtu.be/aIzomrCKnM>.
- Womack, Jones & Roos (1990) *The Machine That Changed the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster.