

Profile

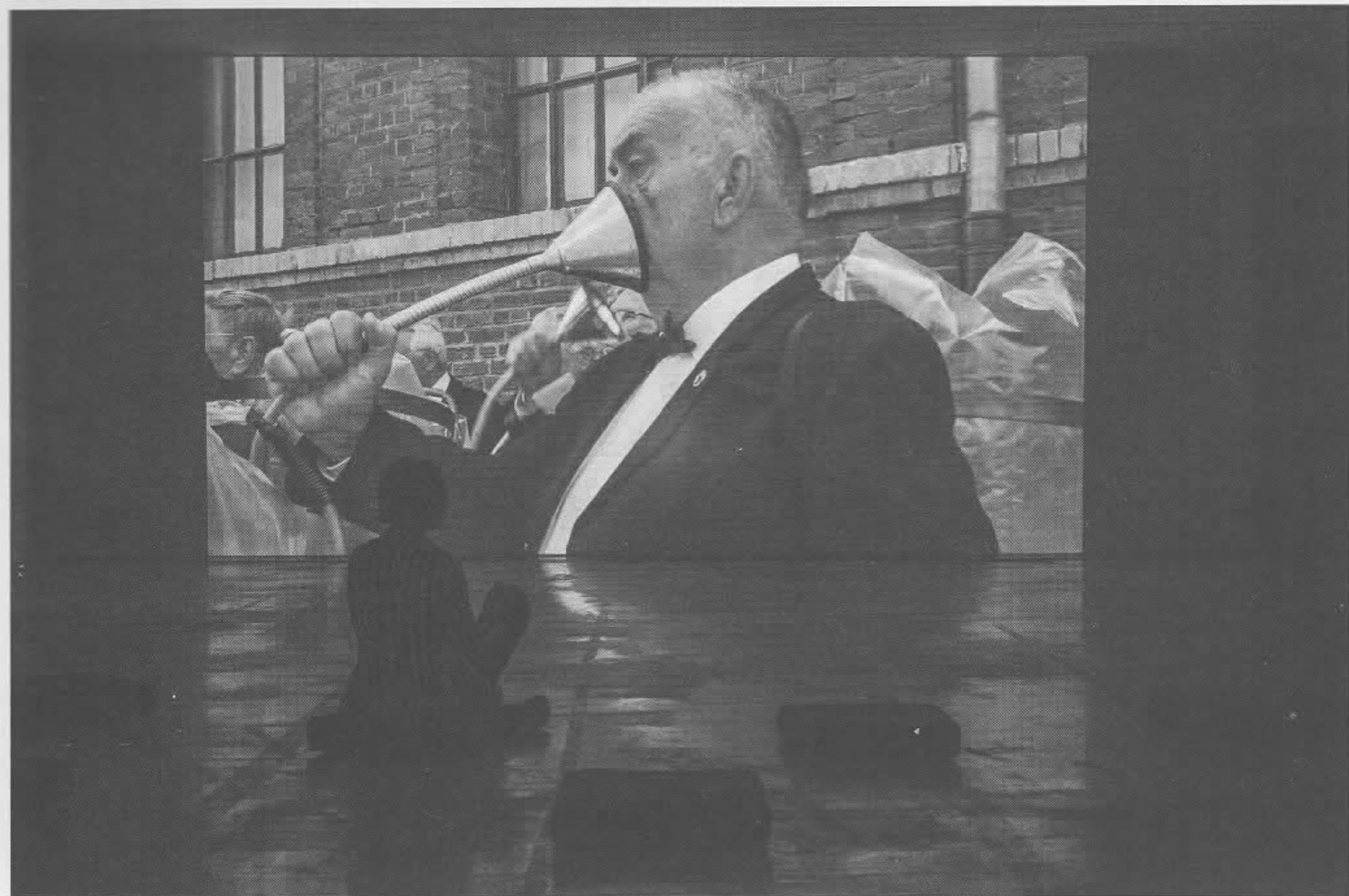
Bertille Bak

The Paris-based French artist tackles marginalisation by engaging with ethnography while at the same time undermining it as a discipline by relinquishing any pretence to distance or objectivity in relation to her subjects.

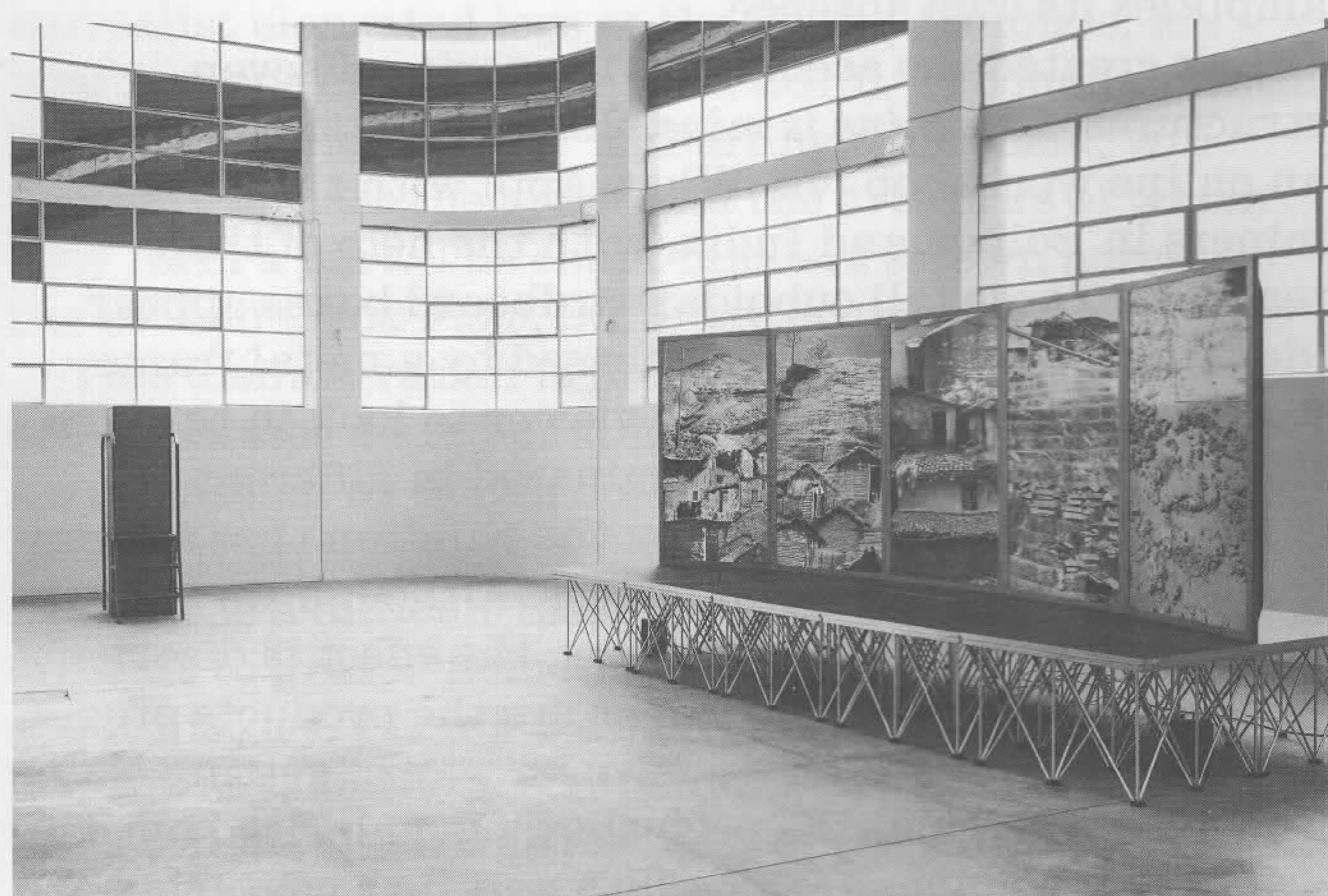
Images of communities other than the artist's own, especially of those denied self-representation beyond their immediate contexts – let alone in the art world – risk magnifying alterity above all else. This pitfall, and the challenge of the intersubjective, cultural crossover, beset the artist whose practice encompasses ethnography. Bertille Bak seeks to tackle this conundrum by doing the work of ethnography in order, then, to dismantle it, by endeavouring, as far as possible, to collapse observational distance and relinquish objectivity. Bak's work grows out of her involvement with localised, tightknit communities – such as the retired coalminers of Barlin in northern France or the shoe shiners of La Paz – who have lost their political voice, or never really had one. She begins each project by immersing herself in the group (for an average of one month), whose predicament she encourages its members to represent, usually in the creation of a video and other related works. These collaborations produce 'new rules, new games and rituals' that resist easy cataloguing, constituting the 'opposite of an archive of the real', as she explained to me in our recent correspondence; to steal a line from TJ Demos, 'truth [is] reinvented on the grounds of uncertainty'. Meanings remain elusive; their playful, often absurdist reinvention invoke utopian images of freedom and rebellion in the face of real oppression.

Bak attributes her interest in communal solidarity to her childhood weekends at Barlin with her grandparents, whose families immigrated from Poland and Belgium to work in the local coalmines. (To be clear, Bak explores solidarity in its local form, built on organic and implicit bonds rather than 'gestures'.) Barlin is the subject of several of Bak's works, including her first film, *You have beautiful eyes, you know...*, 2007, which established her communitarian practice and politico-aesthetic. In the film, the elderly inhabitants of Barlin good-humouredly declare that they wish to save Bak, who has perilously decided to be an artist, by participating in her project ('we don't want to leave her in the shit'). Bak's grandmother performs a joyous, baton-twirling parade dance; a man lulls chickens to sleep in his kitchen. At one point, the grandmother assures her that they do not feel exploited, 'because once a week the girl helps us count cars'. The camera then turns to Bak, who spots a 'lapis lazuli' car passing by, which her grandmother tallies on a blackboard. The absurdity is commensurate with any need to explicate the (implicit) trust between grandmother and granddaughter. The joke is on anyone who should demand explication.

Love, joy and play fight against the more sinister circumstances weighing on Barlin. When she made *You have beautiful eyes, you know...*, much of the town faced renovations that would make the rent unaffordable for its long-time inhabitants, forcing a dispersal of the community. *Over the Wall*, 2008, is a more explicit response to Barlin's predicament. It begins with Bak and her grandmother drawing a map of the town,



You will turn to dust again, 2017, video



Minor Miner, 2022, installation view



This mine is mine, 2022, installation view



The Cradle of Chaos, 2022, installation view

formed of identical brick-like houses. Her grandmother explains how a single newspaper is passed from house to house until someone makes it into 'bricks' for fuel. In a scene redolent with fairy-tale utopianism, the residents build a wall in the middle of a road, over which they catapult and hurl (actual) bricks at an approaching digger. If these bricks stand for solidarity, throughout the film the grandmother is often seen weaving an image of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of Medusa*, 1819, symbolising imminent wreckage. The completed tapestry forms part of *Shelving*, 2009–, which consists of historical depictions of human suffering woven by several of the Barlin community's now-dispersed members. Thus, although not obviously archivable in the remit of social science – 'on the grounds of uncertainty' – the Barlin works provide an archival function, while commemorating a sentiment that neoliberalism too often, too glibly, writes off as nostalgia.

Neoliberalism is Bak's main target, heralded by property developers and gentrifiers, global assembly lines or consumers of aboriginal tourism. The works included in her 2014 exhibition at Le Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire critiqued all these issues by engaging with employees of the gigantic cruise ships that docked in the town's port. In preparation for the show, she worked at a club frequented by crew members, with whom she created *The Tower of Babel*, 2014, a video exploring the abject monotony of their lives, which oddly correlated with the bland fantasy of the holidaymakers. Since giving self-representation to the marginalised is crucial to her project, much of her work battles against the violence of the misrepresentational tourist gaze. For the three-channel film *Entertainment Factory*, 2016, Bak lived with a Lahu village in Thailand, and communities in the Rif region of Morocco and Sainte-Marie-la-Mer in southern France. In each of these places, the residents have transformed their lives 'to satisfy tourists' craving for the exotic'. During each film, some of the villagers occasionally pose before the camera wearing traditional costumes and holding animals; then a meter buzzes loudly as it gauges the 'exoticism' of the costume-animal combination.

At her solo exhibition at the Fondazione Merz in Turin (from which she was awarded the 2019 Mario Merz Prize), Bak is showing her most ambitious work to date, *Minor Miner*, 2022. It consists of five film-screens each representing child miners in five different countries – India, Indonesia, Thailand, Bolivia and Madagascar – where children are used for the extraction of coal, tin, gold, silver and sapphires respectively.

Due to the pandemic, Bak worked for the first time with the communities from afar. Over the course of several months, she communicated with the children via the associations in charge of their schooling, through which she also arranged the filming. The result is a poignant vision of what the children might wishfully imagine their lives could be; the subterranean work is made to look playful as the children float ethereally through mine shafts, some of which begin as hidey-holes in the home. It is as if the life-threatening danger to which the miners are daily subjected were the products of a more privileged child's imagination – a game. Towards the end, the playfulness dissipates: the children become mechanical toys, wearing white ruffs, rotating in a cardboard theatre to the sound of fairground music. Now they are spectres of the uncanny, performing their own lack of will, as if the spell has turned against them. Imagination is a thwarted coping mechanism; the wished-for Utopia – further evoked by the fairy-tale imagery – amplifies its own absence.

Bak created the accompanying series of seven structures, *This mine is mine*, 2022, by setting up an online workshop (via WhatsApp) with the child miners in Bolivia and India, with the help of their teachers. These tall cuboidal cardboard boxes appear identical from the outside, encased by a metal framework with steps inviting the viewer to look in through the top. Inside are wires illuminated in different colours, based on drawings by the children that approximate to their underground paths. Although we are presented with a 'strategic' view, the effect is disorienting: the loose, overlapping lines are the products of an experience to which we have no way of getting close. The form resembles the peep shows popularised by wandering showmen in the 18th and 19th centuries, continuing the theme of mechanical illusion associated with the fairy tale, as well as implicating the viewer as voyeur. Here, as in much of her work, Bak's fairy-tale allusions critique present circumstances by generating utopian longing. Often, they invoke a Marxist technological or mechanical Utopia (involving wondrous machines invented in collaboration with Charles-Henri Fertin) which, in the digital age, strikes as all the more innocent, and therefore vulnerable. As a contributor to the workings of neoliberalism, the viewer as witness is always held accountable.

Bak's status as an outsider to the communities she works with (even in Barlin, insofar as she represents the world of contemporary art) makes it apposite that her work hinges on the intrusion of neoliberal forces. Her anti-ethnography seeks to highlight this conflict by striving to overcome it, even if it can only partially succeed. 'My own artistic practice', Bak told curator Caroline Bourgeois in 2016, 'is always riddled with doubts regarding, for instance, how much "say" the groups I work with have.' Ultimately, it is the endeavour for some kind of artistic facilitation of self-representation that matters. Trust is fundamental and the critical mass of each work resides in this implicit bond.

Bertille Bak's exhibition 'Minor Miner' continues at Fondazione Merz, Turin to 22 May.

Tom Denman is a writer based in London.