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## **April Friges: Goodbye Blue Monday**

**By Nathan Blake**

The film and photographs that compose *Goodbye Blue Monday* by April Friges are an index of postindustrialization marked upon the American landscape and the laboring body. Her subject is the town of Newton, Iowa, its population just shy of sixteen thousand, which lost four thousand jobs when the Maytag Corporation was purchased by Whirlpool in 2006 and subsequently closed its headquarters and laundry manufacturing plant. Since 2007, Friges has been documenting the changes within the community and tracking the economic and social consequences of Maytag's withdrawal. The project's title refers to a motto in Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, used in the marketing of a fully-automated washing machine that promises liberation from the drudgery of domestic labor. "Blue Monday" is the day, presumably, when housewives launder clothes. It is also, of course, the beginning of the workweek. Given Friges' interest in the gender dynamics of labor, it is fitting that the uneasy transitions of labor and home are documented with the withdrawal of an iconic brand and appliance of industry and domesticity.

Of the medium format photographs, Friges presents a trompe l'oeil of storefronts in the now largely shuttered downtown Newton. The painted façade of three conjoined buildings depicts a café, an appliance store revealing the Maytag logo and American flag, and a flower and gift shop. Flowerboxes lighten the dark windows. The flattening shot of the camera blurs the distinction between actual and virtual—between past and present. However, the "for rent" signs displayed in the windows betray the nostalgic illusion of a thriving town center and social cohesion. The photograph is thus an ironic and mournful document of harsh economic conditions and its desperate masking.

As historical counterpoint, John Sutherland's *Why Play Leap Frog?* (1949) has been incorporated in the project and is available along with Friges' film of the same title on YouTube. Explaining the "leap frog" effect of price and wage inflation, the short animated industrial film emphasizes that increased productivity and innovation are mutually beneficial for labor and management. Sutherland, formerly an assistant director for Disney, continues the style and sensibility of the studio. The idealized and homogeneous environment of the film—reflective of the racial and gender politics of the time—provides

a stark contrast to the contemporary realities Friges documents. In the film, a drowsy worker paints faces on dolls. After discovering that he can hardly afford the doll on his wages, he approaches the company president with an ingenious idea of a forked brush that—with the president's investment of a conveyor belt—enables the painting of four dolls at once. With no additional effort, the film implies, this worker's wages increase and the cost of the doll decreases. This innovation is presented as an unequivocal gain for all—strikingly at odds with the apparent exploitation and alienation facing Friges' subjects, now rendered “obsolete” in the profit imperative.

Friges's 16mm film also titled *Why Play Leap Frog?* utilizes much of the gutted interior of Maytag's two-million-square-foot main manufacturing plant. The camera's long, smooth tracking shot follows the line of the now absent conveyor belt, and captures the gestures of workers performing repetitive tasks from muscle memory at their former workstations. Shot and edited as to reflect the continuous flow of the assembly line, the camera haunts the space. Stripped down to a vast shell sparsely populated with the bodies of former employees removed from the machinery of production, the space seems to echo the alienation performed within. Whereas the painted façade in town masks the economic and social vacuum, Friges' camera unflinchingly lays bare the present condition of this absence.

The material presence of the film itself within the exhibition space is an aesthetic and critical response to the absence and obsolescence documented in Newton. The analog quality—of both moving and still images—evoke nostalgia and mourning. In addition, the persistence of “inefficient” technology maintains a social function. Given that the strikingly outmoded analog film runs through a projector without a looper, *Why Play Leap Frog?* demands the assistance of a projectionist to run, rewind, and re-run the film. This periodic attention required in projecting the film asserts a relationship to machines in which the worker is not simply written out of the picture.