Always Working
June 23 - July 28, 2012
Access Gallery, 222 East Georgia Street, Vancouver BC V6A 1Z7
http://accessgallery.ca

Work is All Over: Panel Discussion with Didier Courbot, Jamie Hilder and The Lower Mainland Painting Co., at Access Gallery
Saturday, June 23, 3 pm

No Reading After the Internet: Reading Salon at VIVO Media Arts Centre
Wednesday, June 27, 7 pm

Gabrielle Moser wishes to thank 221A, Paige Armstrong, Paula Cooper Gallery, Shaun Dacey, Sydney Hart, Susan Hobbs Gallery, the Lower Mainland Painting Co., Cait McKinney and VIVO Media Arts Centre

Always Working is supported by the Consulate General of France in Vancouver, the Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council, City of Vancouver, our members and volunteers. Access is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres.

Design by Gabriel Saloman
Didier Courbot (Paris, France) works with a range of media—sculpture, video, photography—to document the urban environment with an extraordinary sensitivity, producing subtle interventions that draw attention to the forgotten and discarded. Courbot has been included in exhibitions at the Jeu de Paume, Paris; the Moscow Museum of Art; the 2005 Yokohama Triennale; and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto, among others.

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Always Working engages the work of five international artists to explore the relationship between artistic labour and the politics of everyday life. Bringing together video, performance and installation, the exhibition examines the excessive and repetitive modes of labour used by artists to activate work as a space for social critique and political action.

In part, Always Working emerges from an admittedly romantic desire to show that artworks do important work; from a belief that contemporary art is not distinct from, but very much entangled with, the same economic forces that structure daily life and work. This impulse is not new—the merging of art with everyday life was
a goal of the twentieth century avant-garde, after all—but in recent years, in an ever-globalizing economy, what counts as “work” has expanded to include all kinds of occupations not traditionally thought as wage labour. Forms of affective labour, such as care-giving, lifestyle coaching or relationship counselling, are now legitimate forms of paid work. At the same time, artists and cultural workers, who economist Richard Florida terms the “creative class,” are being lauded as crucial contributors to the economies of cities, leading to the professionalization of artistic labour. Art is more readily integrated into the economy through these shifts and made into a useful, profitable, and measurable type of work.

While this incorporation of aesthetic and affective labour into the economy might signal recognition of the relevance of art for cities, it also poses problems. How do we maintain a space for the critical role of artistic practice when we are always working, when everything artists do, from generating ideas, to performing, to giving talks, is framed as labour? Always Working proposes that useless and excessive forms of artistic work might offer resistance to these trends. Whether using laborious methods to produce their works, or adopting the role of the worker, these artists model labour that cannot be readily “put to work” in the globalized economy.

For several artists in the exhibition, work involves assuming and then exceeding the role of the everyday labourer, as in Carey Young’s 1999 video, Everything You’ve Heard is Wrong. In this early performance by Young, the artist appears on a stepladder in the middle of London’s Speakers’ Corner, dressed in the conservative suiting characteristic of middle management. The location is famous for polemical speeches by speakers as diverse as evangelical Christians and Marxists, but in this case Young’s entrepreneurial persona uses the venue to offer free, “how-to” advice on making effective speeches. Her earnest but absurd presentation highlights shifting assumptions about how artists contribute to public life, from playing the role of the creative radical to that of the wandering self-presentation consultant.

David Horvitz’s For One Minute (2012) similarly explores the value of the artist’s affective labour by offering viewers the chance to purchase one minute of his attention. In exchange for one dollar, paid online (http://davidhorvitz.com/thinking.html) or in the gallery, Horvitz will devote one minute to thinking about his client. These moments of attention are documented in two colour photographs of the sky, taken by the artist at the start and end of the minute and emailed to the participant and gallery with a caption noting the date and time. As the sky diptychs accumulate on the gallery walls, the project becomes a map of affective exchange between strangers, where a moment of the artist’s attention is paid for as piecework.

Making artistic labour visible is also a concern for Kelly Mark, who in the past has kept a record of every hour she has spent making artwork by punching in and out of a time clock in her studio. Here, she presents Minimum Wage (2008-11), a series of artist contracts with Canadian galleries which have been renegotiated so that her work is remunerated according to the hourly minimum wage (always more than the CARFAC-suggested artist fee). In these binding agreements, Mark takes the glamour out of the “creative class” by asking viewers to recognize the hours of poorly paid, mundane work and physical labour involved in maintaining an artistic practice.

For other artists in the exhibition, the street is the locus of artistic labour, a site where the rhetoric of artists’ roles as agents of social amelioration and urban gentrification can be tested. Didier Courbot’s ongoing photographic series, needs (1999-), captures the artist’s interventions into the streets of Paris, Osaka and Rome, where he devises creative gestures meant to fulfill urban “needs.” In some cases, Courbot’s actions respond to the practical needs of a public, such as repairing a park bench, but in others they demonstrate a lyricism that verges on the absurd, such as installing a birdhouse on a streetlamp. By executing these tasks on objects that are not his own, Courbot takes on the role of an aesthetic Good Samaritan, doing work that may go unnoticed by its intended audience: a practice he has continued through the creation of new interventions in the streets of Vancouver during a one-month residency.

Finally, Jamie Hilder’s performance and video project, Downtown Ambassador (2008-10), depicts another kind of urban intervention, this time through Hilder’s impersonation of a member of the City of Vancouver’s Downtown Ambassadors program, a private security and hospitality force operated by the local Business Improvement Association. While the Downtown Ambassadors are typically charged with assisting tourists and managing the appearance of poverty in the city, often by physically removing people living on the streets, Hilder’s ambassador subverts this role by providing the public with an alternative history of the city focused on the social struggles that have taken place there. His video project, which captures some of these interactions and his subsequent arrest by Vancouver police, suggest that there is something radical about the kind of “work” that art can do.

Focusing on how artistic labour both mirrors and critiques the conditions of contemporary labour, Always Working takes seriously Hito Steyerl’s call for an art that focuses on the political context of its production, rather than looking for a politics outside itself.

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