



Special Section

Always Working

As an extension of the discussions about the financial and working constraints of contemporary art raised by the exhibition *Always Working* (presented at Vancouver's Access Gallery in June 2012 and featuring the works of Didier Courbot, Jamie Hilder, David Horvitz, Kelly Mark, and Carey Young), this special section invites the critic and historian Sven Lütticken and the artist Natascha Sadr Haghghighian to reflect on the conditions under which artistic labour is made to appear or disappear.

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Introduction

We could try to understand [art's] space as a political one instead of trying to represent a politics that is always happening elsewhere. Art is not outside politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution, and its reception. If we take this on, we might surpass the plane of a politics of representation and embark on a politics that is there, in front of our eyes, ready to embrace.

—Hito Steyerl¹

Despite Hito Steyerl's assertion above that contemporary art looks to spaces outside itself to represent the politics of work, it is precisely the spaces of art's production, distribution, and reception—the gallery, the art school seminar, the exhibition catalogue, even the press release—that have recently hyper-visualized artistic labour. One need only look at the number of *e-flux* announcements from the past few years that employ the word “work” in their title to see this emphasis on public projects that represent art as a space of labour: *I Can't Work Like This*, a series of workshops, events, and exhibitions organized by Casco in Utrecht in 2012; the seminar series and subsequent publication *WORK, WORK, WORK* produced by the Swedish organization Iaspis between 2010 and 2012; and the reader *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity and the Labor of Art* (2011) published by the New York-based *e-flux* journal, among them. Artwork about art-as-work seems to be everywhere, even running the risk of settling into a recognizable trope within contemporary artistic practice.²

Always Working, a project I curated for Vancouver's Access Gallery in June 2012, was a part of these attempts at articulating the politics of art as a field of work, using both the space of the gallery and the more dispersed spaces of discursive programming, including a panel discussion, curatorial essay, and reading group. The exhibition, which brought together works by Didier Courbot, Jamie Hilder, David Horvitz, Kelly Mark, and Carey Young, foregrounded the excessive and repetitive modes of labour used by artists to activate work as a space for social critique and political action. The artists in *Always Working* made labour explicit in their works through a range of representational strategies, from insisting that

the art object does its own work on the viewer by demanding an hourly wage in exchange for the number of hours the artwork is exhibited (as Mark does in her series *Minimum Wage* [2008–]), to selling one minute of the artist's attention to strangers in exchange for \$1 (as Horvitz offers to do in his online project *For One Minute* [2012]).

In part, *Always Working* emerged from an admittedly romantic desire to show that artworks *do* important work; from a belief that contemporary art is not distinct from, but entangled within, the same economic and political 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 of as wage labour. Forms of what Michael Hardt describes as affective labour, such as caregiving, lifestyle coaching, or relationship counselling, are now legitimate forms of paid work.³ At the same time, artists and cultural workers, who could be said to produce similar forms of affective labour, are being lauded as crucial contributors to the economies of cities through economist Richard Florida's famous neologism of the “creative class.”⁴ Art, and its labour, is more readily integrated into the economy through these shifts and made into a useful, profitable, and measurable type of work. *Always Working* proposed 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, the artists in the exhibition modelled labour that cannot be readily “put to work” in the globalized economy.

These dispersed projects about art and labour—of which *Always Working* was a localized example—indicate that it is possible and even desirable to visually represent labour within the spaces of contemporary art. But there is a gap between this visualization of art-as-labour in the space of the gallery and what Steyerl is calling for: a self-reflexive articulation of the politics that reside in every aspect of art as a field of work. In the panel discussion and reading group associated with the *Always Working* exhibition, the focus of the discussion often turned to how labour

was made visible by the artworks in the exhibition, but continuously avoided addressing our (invisible) complicity—as artists, curators, writers, viewers, and gallery workers—with the conditions of labour in contemporary art. This is, of course, the distinction Steyerl is trying to draw between a politics of representation and a politics that is already (to use a terrible pun) *at work* in the spaces of art's production, dissemination, and articulation. As she puts it, *a standard way of relating politics to art assumes that art represents political issues in one way or another. But there is a much more interesting perspective: the politics of the field of art as a place of work. Simply look at what it does—not what it shows.*⁵

So how to explain this embrace of the politics of art-as-work at a distance: the hyper-visualization of certain kinds of artistic labour, in particular spaces, alongside the disavowal of our participation in conditions of overwork and exploitation? Why do we have such a hard time talking about the conditions of contemporary art as a space of labour? Is it simply that looking at how (little) artists are paid and how much they (over)work takes the glamour out of working in the arts, one of the supposed incentives for working this way? Is it that we are too close to these conditions, too embedded within them, to be able to clearly see and critique them? Or is it something else altogether, a kind of “allergy” in contemporary art to taking on a political discourse that was so long affiliated with working-class culture (as my colleague Alexander Muir described it)?

Rather than producing a publication that documents the exhibition and its related programming, this special section in *Fillip* attempts to address some of the questions raised in the discussions around *Always Working*, with the hopes of finding strategies for self-reflexively articulating the financial and labour conditions of contemporary art. Whereas the artists in *Always Working* tended towards strategies of over-identification—taking on the role of the artist-as-worker and exaggerating its performative qualities to draw attention to the conditions of labour and cultural capital—in this section, the critic and historian Sven Lütticken and the artist Natascha Sadr Haghigian investigate the conditions under which labour is made to appear or disappear. Employing a self-reflexivity that calls to

mind the strategies of institutional critique, the authors analyze not just how labour is represented, but where and when. Their texts chart moments when labour becomes briefly intelligible and, more often, moments when it is made more than just an allergen to artistic practice, but actually unrepresentable. Lütticken's essay, “The Making of Labour: The Movie,” surveys several recent attempts by video artists to picture capital, examining the disjuncture between visualizing and actually seeing the conditions of labour in global capitalism. As he observes, *As certain forms of work become more theatrical and performative, others fade ever more from view; furthermore, the most visible labour frequently obscures its status and its functioning as labour.*⁶ Haghigian's artist project similarly charts three moments of recognizing the function of her work in the globally dispersed systems of artistic labour, from installing an exhibition at the Sharjah Biennial, to a discussion with her collaborator Uwe Schwarzer, who manufactures artworks for other artists, and through her negotiations with Casco to install an interactive version of an artwork that was originally intended as a refusal to comply with the conditions of overwork in the commercial gallery system.

These texts function in the same way as the films that Lütticken analyzes, operating critically because they “foreground [their] own status as a problematic commodity.”⁷ In the spirit of their provocative self-reflexivity, this introduction tries to draw attention to its status as another “problematic commodity”: one that is complicit in the same conditions of overwork and self-exploitation that it aims to critique. As Andrea Fraser observes, these moments of recognition are purchased through practices of overwork and exploitation: *According to the logic of artistic autonomy, we work only for ourselves; for our own satisfaction, for the satisfaction of our own criteria of judgment, subject only to the internal logic of our practice, the demands of our consciences or our drives. It has been my experience that the freedom gained in this form of autonomy is often no more than a basis for self-exploitation. Perhaps it is because the privilege of recognizing ourselves and being recognized in the products of our labour must be purchased (like the “freedom” to labour as such, according to Marx) at the price of surplus labour,*

*generating surplus value, or profit, to be appropriated by another. In our case, it is primarily symbolic profit that we generate. And it is conditioned precisely on the freedom from economic necessity that we express in our self-exploitation.*⁸

As both an exhibition, and now a publication project, *Always Working* was produced in the kinds of spaces that both Lütticken and Haghigian trace in their texts: on a laptop in my home office, in cafés in Toronto and in rented apartments in Vancouver, in airport lounges and at communal tables in the public library. It is the product of two years spent in the abstracted working environments of e-mail, Skype, and Excel spreadsheets, and, later, in the physical labour of painting walls, photocopying, setting up video equipment, and cleaning gallery windows and floors. It is also a commodity that benefited from the practices of self-exploitation that Fraser describes, employing the services of a graphic designer, copyeditor, professional photographer, and a bartender, who all offered their work for little or no monetary compensation. As a publication, it now circulates in another set of systems of artistic labour used to disseminate art discourse: in artist-run centres and the gift shops of major museums, on tables at art book fairs staffed by volunteers, and excerpted and copied and pasted online.

This labour is usually invisible within the commodity that circulates in public, repressed in order to present a professional finished product. To draw attention to it—to try to articulate it through this text—feels awkward and embarrassing, and underscores the affective registers of representing the conditions of artistic labour. I described the aims of *Always Working* as romantic, while Steyerl urges us to “embrace” the politics of art: phrasings that point to the ways that desire inflects the impulse to represent art as labour. It would be easy to argue that this desire is motivated by the appeal of borrowing the seductive powers of consumer capitalism, of turning the usually obscured labour practices that underpin artistic production into highly visible fetish objects (epitomized for me by that thrilling moment in a public talk when a speaker's computer desktop—often crammed with PDFs of research and in-progress Word documents—is made public, briefly concretizing artistic labour as

a visible object). Or, that it is another way of implicitly asserting privilege: to represent the surplus work invested in an artistic project is to assert the producer's agency in deciding which kinds of labour to invest in, implying they have the financial and cultural capital to be make these choices rather than working to merely “get by.” Or, that this desire is driven by the fantasy of appropriating the radicalism of labour politics associated with unions and the working class, political movements that now seem temporally removed and physically alienated from the middle-class spaces of contemporary art.

But to analyze the representation and aestheticization of labour in this way, as the product of the seductive powers of capitalism (and there is a well-established tradition of this type of Marxist critique in art discourse, typified by the criticism that has appeared in *October* since the 1970s), is to also obscure other, more nuanced desires that motivate our complicity with conditions of overwork and our need to represent them. Fantasies of autonomy—both from the commercial art market and from institutional authority—are undoubtedly central to some of these representational strategies, but they are also motivated by the inverse: by a desire for dependence, entanglement, and reliance. To articulate our practices of self-exploitation is to acknowledge our consensual participation in these systems, to admit that we want, as Fraser puts it, “to be appropriated by another.” These are the affective paradoxes of artistic labour that are repressed in representations of art-as-work: our autonomy comes at the masochistic price of working against our own best interests; to practice as an “independent curator” is to recognize and find pleasure in my bald dependence on the work of others. (It is telling, for instance, that in the midst of installing the exhibition I sent a text message to a friend—one who had lent me tools and helped troubleshoot the technical components of one of the works—joking that I never thought curatorial work would require such an extensive knowledge of drill bits. “Stop sexting and get back to work,” was her reply.)

These complex, often contradictory, experiences of working with and relying on others are also the conditions that, according to psychoanalytic theory, mark experiences of care. Drawing on

the ideas of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, Deborah Britzman proposes that experiences of care are both pleasurable and uncomfortable because “care itself is the advocacy of human dependency as the foundation of life, transience, and its vulnerability.”⁹ Because accepting care necessarily involves recognizing the limits of autonomy and acknowledging our dependence on others, it is always accompanied by fears of losing the other. According to Britzman, this is why experiences of care are difficult to represent: “the ‘labour’ of care leaves in its wake inexplicable experiences that are not work, that are good and bad, that signify both love and hate.”¹⁰ Psychoanalysis's emphasis on the emotional vicissitudes of work and care help to explain why labour appears and disappears in the spaces of contemporary art. While there are recognizable strategies for representing the physical labour and financial conditions of art as a space of work, its affective registers—the desires, anxieties, and fantasies that motivate our participation in its conditions—remain only partially intelligible. The texts in this section attempt to chart some of these contradictions, bringing these usually obscured processes into view.

If we are always working, then we are also always desiring something from that work, and its visibility. The challenge is to embrace and articulate that desire, and the complex political and affective entanglements that go along with it.

Gabrielle Moser

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