Motivated by a rejection of the conventional concep-
tion of work, where productivity is paramount, Richard 
Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens’s Putting Life to Work 
problematicizes dominant notions of life and labour. 
Their concern is as much with the representation of 
these notions as it is with the concepts themselves. The 
artists examine the specific forms of representation that 
have emerged with the acceleration and intensification 
of capitalism, where both life and work are reduced to 
that which is calculated and commodified, to what is 
easily subsumed by capital.

The reductivism implicit in capitalism is particu-
larly apparent in Each Number Equals One Inhalation 
and One Exhalation (2016), an expansive installation 
of delicate, handmade diagrams representing the effi-
ciency of contemporary modes of production. Under 
Taylorism, or the so-called “science of management,” 
every action a worker undertakes—down to the number 
of breaths taken—is timed and calculated to maximize 
output. Rendered in small lengths of wood, wire, 
thread, and strips of coloured acetate, each diagram is 
displayed with a brief title summarizing what is being 
measured, but without accompanying data or informa-
tion about what each axis represents. Distilled in this 
way, the diminution of one’s daily activity to a mundane 
metric seems to take on a heightened degree of absurd-
ity. It is an absurdity that, I would argue, is not lost on 
many working people; often it is only those who extract 
productivity as it is with the concepts themselves. The 
importance of play appears to be elevated above that of productive labour, in turn draw-
ing attention to the nature of productivity itself.

Productivity is also an element in the video instal-
lation Is there anything left to be done at all? (2014), 
where the artists attempt to remove production from the 
self-directed residency in which it was created. In collabo-
ration with four other artists (Justine A. Chambers, 
Kevin Rodgers, Rodrigo Martí and Ryan Tong), the 
group appears to build platforms or supports, though 
what might be supported is never clear. As with Real 
failure needs no excuse, those involved seem to be less 
concerned with the success of their endeavours than 
with calling into question our broader understanding of 
success and failure. As the artists have acknowledged,
they are not attempting to be entirely unproductive, but 
rather to draw attention to this culturally specific form 
of productivity.1

While much of the critical reflection that Is there 
anything left to be done at all? has received focuses on 
the artists’ critique of production, it strikes me that one 
must also consider the role of autonomy here. Given 
the disciplinary nature of most contemporary work-
places, it is important to remember that Ibghy and 
Lemmens’s project was a self-directed residency. This 
is not to say that there is absolute autonomy, or that the 
artists operate entirely outside the modes of production 
that they address. As Isabell Lorey writes, the logic of 
productivity is internalized despite the degree of self-
determination or self-governance experienced by those 
working in the arts. The resulting precarity experienced 
by cultural producers, is, though self-imposed, precarity 
nonetheless.2 Yet this autonomy changes the nature of 
the work, and the absence or alteration of hierarchies 
has a significant impact upon those engaged in any 
project, whether in the arts or otherwise. In light of this 
dynamic, it is not then productivity itself that is at issue, 
but the dominant logic of production. By remaining 
critical of that which is easily calculated or commodi-
fied, Ibghy and Lemmens’s work challenges this 
dominant logic and, in turn, bears the potential for 
empowerment.3

1 Shannon Garden-Smith, “Ways Out From Inside: Towards the Un-
 Productive in the Work of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens,” Breach 
Magazine 2 (September 2015): http://www.breachmagazine.com/casual-

2 Isabell Lorey, “Governmentality and Self-Precarization: On the 
Normalization of Cultural Producers,” Trans, Lisa Rosenblatt and Dagmar 
Fink, transnational “Machterelte und Subjektivierung,” (November 2006) 

3 Though she is guarded in her optimism, Lorey writes that where precari-
 ous workers can achieve a degree of self-governance their labour “not 
only implies subjugation but is also incalculable and potentially empow-
 ering.” See State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious (London and 