

EXHIBITION REVIEW

RICHARD IBGHY AND MARILOU LEMMENS, *PUTTING LIFE TO WORK*

Curated by Véronique Leblanc, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal, 18 February–16 April 2016

Review by Michael DiRisio, *Independent Critic*

Motivated by a rejection of the conventional conception of work, where productivity is paramount, Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens's *Putting Life to Work* problematizes 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.

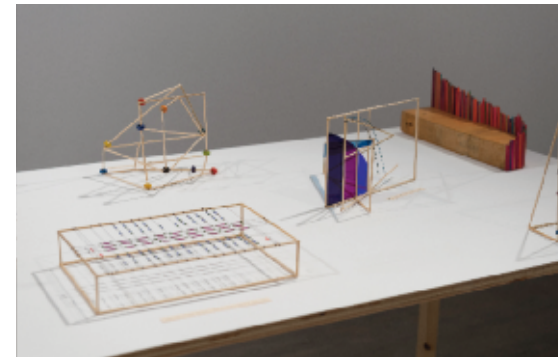
The reductivism implicit in capitalism is particularly apparent in *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation* (2016), an expansive installation of delicate, handmade diagrams representing the efficiency of contemporary modes of production. Under Taylorism, or the so-called “science of management,” 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 information 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 absurdity. It is an absurdity that, I would argue, is not lost on most working people; often it is only those who extract the surplus value from this labour that feel such calculations contribute to the greater good.

Despite the delicate, playful appearance of these graphic representations, the brutality of a disciplinary

regime lies not far behind. The singularity of the work's title, centred on *each* number—one inhalation and *one* exhalation—appears to point toward the division of labour that preceded and paved the way for Taylorism, as well as the individualism that emerged with these disciplinary divisions. Yet these types of diagrams simultaneously negate individual difference and flatten all human experience. Care in making, not to mention care work more broadly, becomes devalued if not omitted entirely. The intricacy of the miniatures speaks to the artists' own perspective on care, and the aesthetic quality of the abstract compositions serves as a nod toward an entirely different paradigm of value.

Other works in the exhibition, such as *Real failure needs no excuse* (2012) and *Is there anything left to be done at all?* (2014), further Ibhgy and Lemmens's nuanced consideration of power and production. Shot in a vacant office building, the single-channel video *Real failure needs no excuse* depicts Lemmens stacking objects and fixtures found onsite, creating odd constructions that have no apparent purpose. Here too, the compositions are often aesthetically pleasing, despite the cold, bureaucratic feel of the space wherein she works. As the video continues, she builds up the awkward assemblages into precarious piles of office detritus. As each stack tumbles to the ground, it becomes apparent that she is interested in both making and unmaking, in work that has neither a tangible result nor necessarily any finality at all. The importance of play appears to be elevated above that of productive labour, in turn drawing attention to the nature of productivity itself.

Productivity is also an element in the video installation *Is there anything left to be done at all?*, but here the artists attempt to remove production from the self-directed residency in which it was created. In collaboration 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,



Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens, *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation* (2016). Installation detail. Photo by Paul Litherland. Courtesy of the artists and the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.



Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens, *Real failure needs no excuse* (2012). Still from video. Photo by Paul Litherland. Courtesy of the artists and the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.

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 workplaces, it is important to remember that Ibhgy 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 production 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 commodified, Ibhgy and Lemmens's work challenges this dominant logic and, in turn, bears the potential for empowerment.³

In considering the overall impact of *Putting Life to Work*, one must avoid reducing the exhibition to a flat rejection of productivity. It is the specific capitalist logic of this production, as well as the ways that it is represented and enacted, that concern the artists. The care present in the construction of the works throughout the exhibition indicates an interest in alternative ways of valuing labour, and the artists' rejection of strict divisions undermines the social stratification and possessive individualism that dominates the current liberal order. By acknowledging the absurdity and brutality of disciplinary regimes, their normalization can be disrupted. In turn, one could then ask the question: How might one live when not put to work?

- 1 Shannon Garden-Smith, “Ways Out From Inside: Towards the Un-Productive in the Work of Richard Ibhgy and Marilou Lemmens,” *Breach Magazine* 2 (September 2015): <http://www.breachmagazine.ca/ways-out-from-inside>. Accessed 28 June 2016.
- 2 Isabell Lorey, “Governmentality and Self-Precarization: On the Normalization of Cultural Producers,” trans. Lisa Rosenblatt and Dagmar Fink, *transversal: “Machines and Subjectivation,”* (November 2006): <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/en>. Accessed 28 June 2016.
- 3 Though she is guarded in her optimism, Lorey writes that where precarious workers can achieve a degree of self-governance their labour “not only implies subjugation but is also incalculable and potentially empowering.” See *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 106.