

Allan Sekula, *Ship Inspector, Seattle*, 2005—07, outdoor display panels, 490 × 678cm each. Installation at documenta 12, Kassel, 2007. Photograph: Andrew Freeman. Courtesy the artist and Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica

**Situation Wanted:
Something about Labour
— Marina Vishmidt**

In his 2006 Hermès Lecture, titled ‘Depiction, Object, Event’ (2006), Jeff Wall proposes the term ‘second appearance’ to describe the quotation in and transmutation by the art field of social institutions not immanent to it.

If Warhol could imitate a media firm, others coming after him could imitate a museum department, a research institute, an archive, a community-service organisation and so on — that is, one could develop a mimesis, still within the institution of art, of any and every one of the potential new domains of creativity suggested by the conceptual reduction, but without thereby having to renounce the making of works and abandon the art world and its patronage.¹

Thus, the conceptual reduction is actually an expansion in real terms, an inflation. Under the ‘post-medium’ or ‘expanded field’ condition of art, which Wall also relates to Thierry de Duve’s category of ‘nominalism’, such institutions are tautologically designated as art objects by their appearance in the art field – and also grammatically via their relationship to other practices inhabiting this field.² The examples Wall mentions, taken from a survey of contemporary biennials, include ‘critical urbanism ... radical pedagogies ... strategies of wellness ... hobbies and therapies’, all amounting to an ‘art of prototypes of situations’ in which ‘it would not be as if anyone renounced art, but that art itself became diffuse, lost track of its own boundaries and lost interest in them’.³

In an irony that we might deem delicious or unpalatable depending on our taste, the lecture was delivered to a public comprising art professionals and local business entrepreneurs. And as one of Wall’s instances of ‘an institutionalised neo-Situationism’ was ‘ephemeral forms of labour’, perhaps all those who were in attendance could believe that they were in their own way contributing to the advance of contemporary art, be it through direct involvement or through the use of flexible employment practices.

Under these conditions, a speculative link could be drawn between the expansion of contemporary art into social life – such as labour, representational codes or political claims – and the ebbing visibility of labour as a political force in the social terrain where this expansion occurs. The process is simultaneous with the advance of the value-form as market logic that renders any political debate redundant into more and more spheres of social life, converting ever greater swathes of it into labour on ever-dwindling terms.⁴ Here, the ‘value form’ can be understood as the basic structure of the capitalist mode of

1 Jeff Wall, ‘Depiction, Object, Event’, first Hermès Lecture, delivered at ’s Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands on 29 October 2006, available at http://www.hermeslezing.nl/hermeslezing2006_eng.pdf (last accessed on 20 July 2008). Also published in *Afterall*, Issue 16, Autumn/Winter 2007, pp.5–17.

2 In *Kant After Duchamp* (1998), de Duve calls ‘nominalism’ Marcel Duchamp’s practice of identifying art as a result of its being named as such and of its presence in an artistic context. As Wall says, ‘the name “art” must be applied to any object that can be legitimately nominated as such by the artist. Or, to be more circumspect, it is the object from which the name art cannot be logically withheld. The readymade therefore proved that an arbitrary object can be designated as art and that there is no argument available to refute that designation.’ *Ibid.*, p.7.

3 *Ibid.*, p.16. Or, as Daniel Buren writes, ‘In order, no doubt, to get closer to “reality”, the “conceptual” artist becomes gardener, scientist, sociologist, philosopher, storyteller, chemist, sportsman ... the vague concept of the word “concept” itself implies a return to romanticism.’ Daniel Buren, ‘Beware’, *Studio International*, vol.179, March 1970, p.100. Re-printed in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2000, p.144.

production which relies on the expansion of money (profit) rather than the satisfaction of needs through the emphasis on exchange value over use value, and depends on a society which complies with the expansion of money as its highest good, however ideologically mediated. The 'spectrality' of value in an age where accumulation is more typically pursued via finance than production contributes to an 'abstraction' of social life where the material conditions for the reproduction of life, such as labour, are de-valourised, and notions such as 'creativity' and 'community' are held up as ideas. Art then becomes a sphere where these two tendencies, the ideality of money and the ideality of community, come to take a central place, and labour returns as a metaphor among others in a mode of production structured by exchange, whether we are talking finance or aesthetics, while property and exploitation become givens that can no longer be directly addressed. The 'post-conceptual' condition of art as an indefinitely expansive field may have much to do with the expansion of the art market that came on the heels of a redistribution of surplus value from producing to financialised sectors of the economy, driven by the enclosure of public resources as privatised profit centres.

This redistribution eddies and effloresces in the art market, where it creates discourses and institutions of contemporary art that function as a cultural oxygen tent in which other forms of social doing left out in the cold – labour, public goods, collective institutions, historical memory – can return to make a 'second appearance'. Such a dialectic of expansion and enclosures stems from the social decentring of the subject of labour in favour of the speculative ('creative') subject within the present era's cycles of value production. And as capitalism's means of bestowing value are divorced from an awareness of exploitation, value is seen as being created by nothing at all. The material conditions of labour, of art, and the infrastructures of finance that impact on them can no longer be accounted for as social facts that can be changed – but they may be quoted. As commodification of ever-wider tracts of social life continues, such life may return inverted and whole, manneristically extracted from the manifold of labour to be folded into the multiples of art, thus ensuring art production keeps pace with commodification. Further, it is the conditions of commodification which pragmatically provide the conditions for the critique of that commodification, when not legitimating the market through the possibilities it affords to critique. This thesis has become familiar over the last decades in another form, as the nominalist gesture popularised by Conceptual art was found to coincide with, if not affirm, the 'post-Fordist' emphasis on information and subjectivity as engines of production.⁵

But it has likewise become difficult to argue that 'production' is an unambiguous term in an era where debt makes money, recycling is a moral imperative and curatorial discourse promotes the combinatorial impulse glossed as 'post-production'.⁶ As a consequence of this, an analysis of the relation of subjectivity – understood as both a productive and unproductive or resistant force – to the value form of labour needs to look elsewhere. Parallels can tentatively be established between these movements – the diffusion of art and the diffusion of work – by examining the performance of discrete instances of labour in contemporary art. These function as simultaneously a symptom of a generalised condition of work and of the disappearance of socially visible work. A way of thinking about art and work in an expanded field could be through the re-conceiving of art as a species of what Marx termed 'abstract labour' – the axiom of capitalist social relations which dictates that those with nothing but their labour power to sell can sell it to any owner of capital since work done in the form of exchange-value is indifferent as to its content.⁷ With work and art getting closer to each other in this 'indifference' ('art' is anything that can be 'sold' as such, 'work' is anything that can be

4 See Nicholas von Hoffman, 'Squeezing the American Dream: Workers Face Diminishing Returns', *Truthdig*, 9 June 2008. Also available at <http://www.alternet.org/story/87405/> (last accessed on 27 June 2008). See also John Barker, 'Structural Greed: the "Credit Crunch"', *Variant*, Issue 32, Summer 2008, p.15, footnote 7: 'Robert Brenner estimates that for 80 per cent of American workers' real wages have stayed at 1979 levels.' Also available at <http://www.variant.randomstate.org/pdfs/issue32/barker32.pdf> (last accessed on 20 July 2008).

5 See, for example, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. G. Elliott), London and New York: Verso, 2006, and Sabeth Buchmann, 'Under the Sign of Labor', *Art After Conceptual Art* (eds. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann), Cambridge, London and Vienna: The MIT Press and Generali Foundation, 2006.

6 See for example Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (trans. J. Herman), New York and Berlin: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002.

7 See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol.1* (trans. B. Fowkes), Hardmonsworth: Penguin, 1976, esp. pp.42, 142, 150 and 308.

‘bought’), abstract labour, as the social form of their ongoing (re-)production, stands out in sharper relief. Ever since art became defined by the restructuring of artistic labour that begun in the 1960s and has been variously noted as ‘de-materialisation’ or ‘deskilling’ – with an emphasis on process, mediation and social relations – it has also been pegged to the restructuring of work-at-large in increasingly palpable ways. If both art and work can be anything, and anything that is not work can be art, then art could be seen as the phantasmatic enactment of this potentiality as potentiality – the potentiality *not* to work.

It should be noted that work, broadly conceived, has been making a comeback within the exhibition circuit, in line with a drive to revisit and recontextualise diverse art practices through their relation to mid-late twentieth century social movements. This has resulted in museum headliners dealing with feminism (‘WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution’ at the Los Angeles MOCA and P.S.1, New York in 2007 or ‘Global Feminisms’ at Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, also in 2007), social movements as such (‘Forms of Resistance’ at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in 2007) or the recent panoply of shows and projects pondering global migration (including Helen Molesworth’s ‘Work Ethic’, which toured the US in 2004–05, or Alejandra Riera’s ‘maquettes-sans-qualité’, at Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, also in 2004–05). Clearly, work is an issue for art.

Rather than a programmatic method, a problematic emerges from the garish tones of this schematic map that can help us sketch out techniques recently used by artists to incorporate labour and its representations in their work. It could start with activist irony, retrieval and the monument in Allan Sekula, specifically in his *Shipwreck and Workers* (2005) at documenta 12 in 2007; the pathos of logistics chains in Mika Rottenberg’s *Dough* (2006); and the plain pleasures of performativity in Yvonne Rainer’s ‘task’-based approach to postmodern dance.

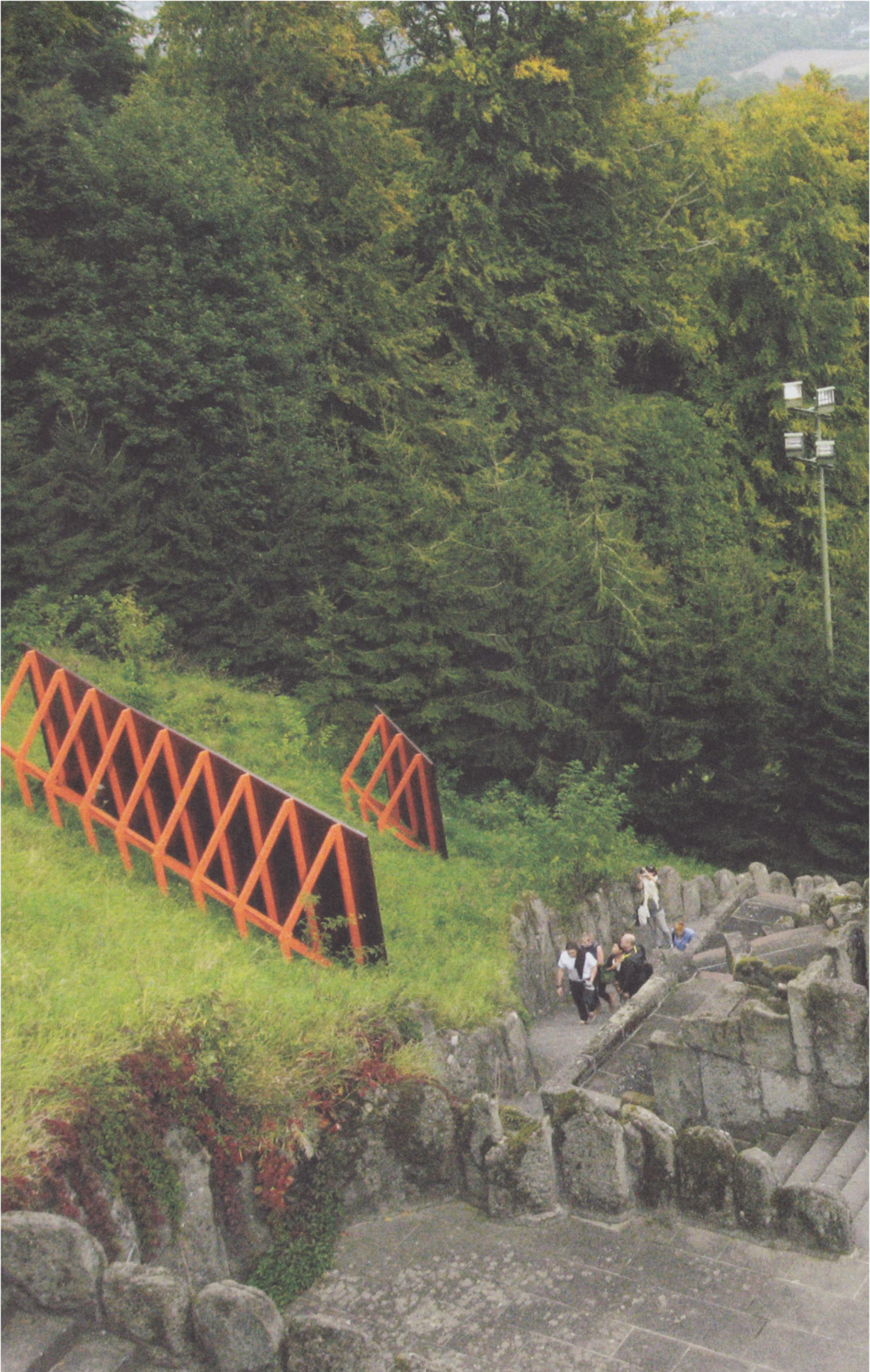
‘IMAGINE A MONUMENT TO IMPERIAL LABOUR’: THE FOLLY AND THE MONUMENT

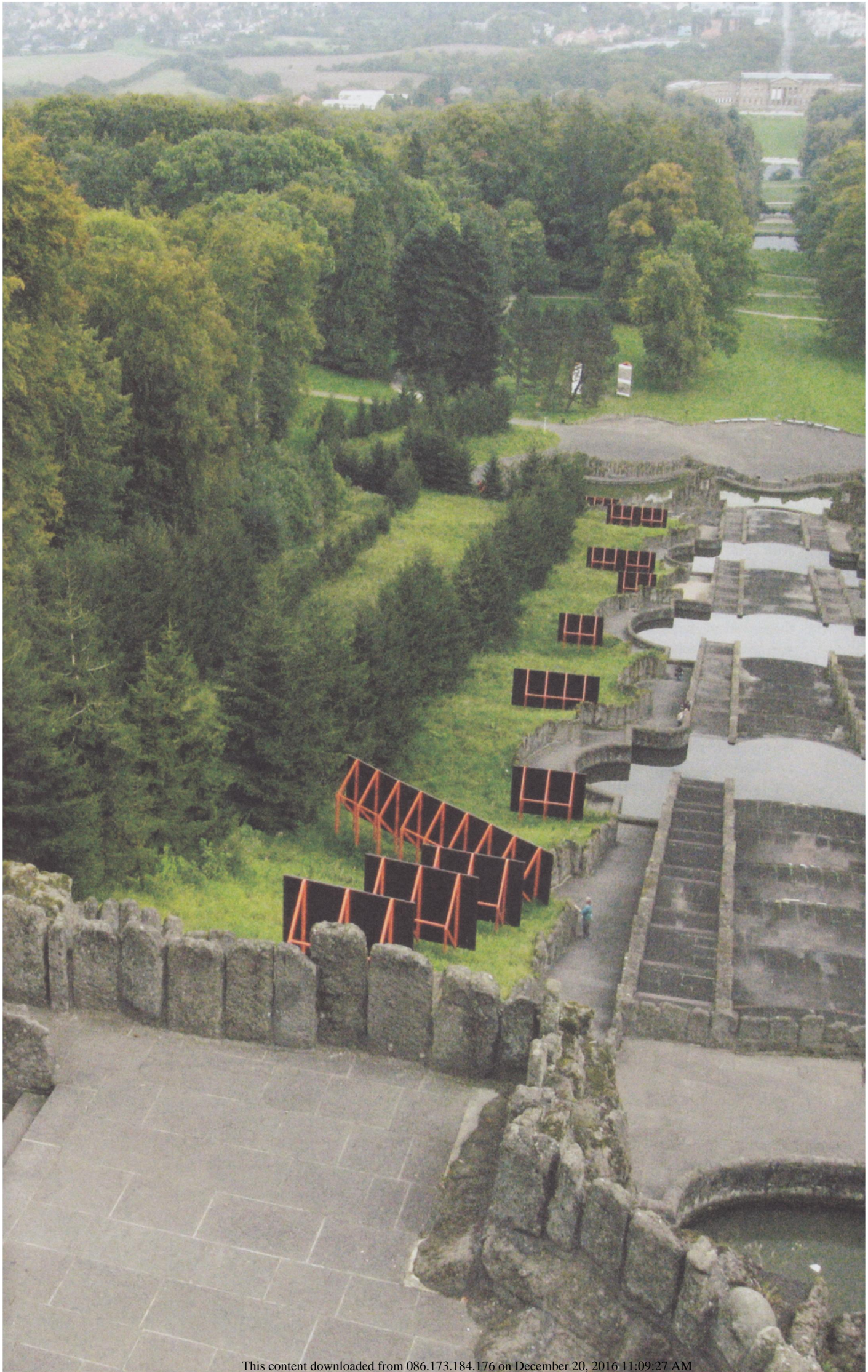
It could be advanced that the articulation of social and artistic labour has been engaged nowhere more forcefully and consistently than in the forty-year-plus practice of Allan Sekula. The post-conceptual condition that Jeff Wall has defined with ‘There is a form of art that is not a work of art’ has been enacted in Sekula’s activist documentary strategies. These are fuelled by an ethics of visibility and a social justice politics determined to challenge the structural invisibility of manual labour in today’s circuits of capital accumulation. But there is also in his work a loaded encounter with the specific propensities and political potentials of ‘works of art’, insofar as they can be structures for representing social facts and not be limited to aestheticising them. As a social fact is taken out of the vagaries of quotidian experience and media flux, it can be thrown into critical relief, but it is precisely this displacement into the art field which may imply relinquishing the power to interrogate that fact. This dialectic between conflict and its aestheticisation is captured by Sekula’s translation of the content and contradictions of maritime workers’ lives into the extensive panoplies of *Fish Story* (1999, shown at Documenta11 in 2002) and *Shipwreck and Workers* (2005, shown at documenta 12 in 2007), in which the large-format photographs retain a commitment to photography’s indexical relation to social reality. At documenta 12 the monumental dimension of this visual strategy was literally achieved by the installation of billboard-scale photographs in the slope of the Karlsberg hill, in the aristocratic eighteenth-century leisure grounds of the Schloss Wilhelmshöhe in Kassel.

In allusion to the operational changes in today’s labour conditions, and in contrast to the Rococo temple halfway up the hill and the other calcified frivolities dotted about, Sekula’s monument was constructed to be ‘portable’ and ‘flexible’ (adaptable to other exhibition contexts before and since), but nonetheless of an imposing size and simplicity.⁸ A uniform orange on the reverse side of the prints, visible on the downhill descent, could be read as a nod to modern art’s trust in the transformative powers of abstraction – two monuments for the price of one. The piece also aimed for context,

overleaf
Back view of the Allan
Sekula installation
at documenta 12, Kassel,
2007. Photograph:
Andrew Freeman.
Courtesy the artist
and Christopher
Grimes Gallery,
Santa Monica

8 See Hilde van Gelder, ‘Allan Sekula: Documenta 12 Project (and Beyond),’ *A Prior*, Issue 15, 2007. Also available at <http://www.aprior.org/topics/14> (last accessed on 20 July 2008).





incorporating local actors and non-traditional typologies of labour, like the image of the local mother who had just given birth, with the midwife next to her. Here, making labour visible on such a commanding scale and site can be understood as a political resistance to the erasure of labour's historical memory and social rights from the narratives of both capital and contemporary art – a vanishing which is also contingent on the waning of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century workers' culture of agitprop and mobilising imagery. This culture was not only present in the 'workers' states' of Eastern Europe, but also in the progressive-humanist tradition that Sekula cited with an image from the oeuvre of the naturalist Belgian sculptor Constantin Meunier, author of group and individual statues of labourers such as *Industry* (1893), *The Port* (1901–02) and *The Crouching Miner* (1903). Yet, far from a formalistic disinterment of obsolete modes of representation, Sekula's staging poses a cogent though not quite straightforward question: what happens to the relationship between form and content when the content to some measure needs to disappear in order for the form that would visualise it to appear?⁹ In that context it is no longer enough to show the 'dignity of labour' as a counterpoint to the all-pervasive simulacra of profit; in relation to the documenta 12 leitmotif of modernity as our ghost town, labour as a discrete form of human praxis can carry a critical charge only by being embedded into the landscape of leisure which now constitutes our workhouse.¹⁰ The wager that new horizons for life are more likely to be activated by bringing life into the art field than by fusing art and life in a post-revolutionary settlement of everyday life – the fusing that Wall recounts in his lecture – becomes in *Shipwreck and Workers* a polemical rebuttal which stakes its entire force on the elements not adding up on a scale that is literally monumental.

In the voice-over to his *Lottery of the Sea* (2006) video, Sekula coins a proposition that runs a strong chance of becoming a new epigram for critical intellectuals on a par with Fredric Jameson's often recycled 'it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'. Sekula says that 'risk' could be to economics what the 'sublime' is to aesthetics. In which case, the worker is the mundane relic who must yield to the Romantic figure of the risk-taking hedge-fund manager. The un(ac)countable, the excessively large or small, the virtual and the inconceivable – these are the bread-and-butter of contemporary economics, while crises and commodity flows impart a salutary awe, said by central banks to be as morally uplifting as a sunset over rocky peaks. But risk can be managed, while the proper being of the sublime is to be unmanageable. Can aesthetics raise the worker to the same level of sublimity as risk? By erecting a photographic monument-montage to the contemporary worker who has dipped below the horizons of social and political calculation, eclipsed by the consumer, Sekula imagines an untimely, though not unprecedented, re-skilling of the artist. The artist appears as visual engineer of a struggle, here a comrade-in-arms to social movements (union struggles, migration, struggles against privatisation) that many of the exhibition visitors would have little direct contact with. The 'critical realism' Sekula espouses has a history as long as – and in many places convergent with – modernism itself. By pitching his modernism at the ruined modernity conjectured by the curators of documenta, he eschews the sentimentality but not the residual strength of modernism's notion of 'commitment'. He asserts the politics of labour as an untimely and urgent meditation for art, all the while inhabiting the contradictions of Kassel's imperial folly-escape and the civic norm of a monument, bourgeois foils to a radical claim which is, finally, a civilising one: remember the worker! In a much earlier text titled 'Documentary and Corporate Violence' (1979), Sekula notes that 'the subjective aspect of liberal aesthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle'.¹¹ It is not clear whether he means the subjectivity of the artistic producer or of the public, yet it could very well be argued that liberal subjectivity is structural rather than intentional, and compassion is the default response when the dimension of collective struggle is missing, whether in the contexts

9 Documenta 12 here appears as part of the inflation of art mega-events or 'biennalisation', the statistical and discursive proliferation of sites where contemporary art emerges from, and responds to, the conditions of its spectacularisation. The connection of 'biennalisation' with place competition and culture-led regeneration may also come to the fore in such analyses, as local priorities go into eclipse for the sake of global marketing of the local.

10 One of the three leitmotifs put forward for documenta 12 was 'Is Modernity Our Antiquity?'.

11 Allan Sekula, 'Documentary and Corporate Violence', in *Dialogue/Discourse/Research* (exh. cat.), Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1979. Reprinted in A. Alberro and B. Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art*, op. cit., p.360.

where the work is encountered or in society at large; and that radical aesthetics might consist of pointing to this lack or confronting it with an excess, rather than conjuring lost struggles which are as likely to be fetishised as to inspire new ones.

The question remains to what extent working-class empowerment depends on the refusal of work, rather than a recognition of its manifest dignity. This is a point of view that has become increasingly visible in the last years, due to the spread of post-Operaist and ‘immaterial labour’ political discourse in debates primarily transpiring in the cultural sphere.¹² Is it possible to embrace at once the propositions that work can and should loom large as an issue for aesthetics and social policy, and that work can and should be eliminated, along with the social relations that sustain it?

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED, OR ‘MIMESIS OF THE HARDENED AND ALIENATED’¹³

*The capitalist objectivity of the productive mechanism with respect to the workers finds its optimal basis in the technical principle of the machine ... The capitalistic social relationship is concealed within the technical demands of machinery and the division of labour seems to be totally independent of the capitalist’s will. Rather, it seems to be the simple and necessary results of the means of labour’s ‘nature’.*¹⁴

One way of refusing work can be to refuse to take it seriously, and the mimetic critique of mechanised labour has been pursued parodically at least since Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* (1936), while the secret life of machinery in thrall to the laws of physics has been indelibly sketched by Rube Goldberg and Peter Fischli/David Weiss, among others.¹⁵ Artists’ tendency to displace the categories of what they do by importing practices and representations of labour into their work also has a proud tradition, from outsourcing in Minimalism and Pop to administration in Conceptual art. If the paradigm of industrial labour is isolated from a broader fascination with rules and productivity that marks artistic appropriations of capitalist work, then two currents can be discerned: the entropic slapstick of mechanism on its own on the one hand, and the tragicomedy of humans caught up in malfunctioning machines. Mika Rottenberg’s video installation *Dough* (2006) conflates the two, featuring female factory workers executing delirious tasks in order to keep a low-tech production line for the manufacture of dough on the move. The rationalised, Taylorised mode of worker control that remains the standard for manufacturing assembly has a *prima facie* comedy to it, as its primary purpose is to increase efficiency and strengthen control by subjugating the worker to a regimen of tiny, meaningless tasks.¹⁶ The logic of the assembly line is the humour of the assembly line. But in *Dough*, this intrinsic zaniness is taken to such outlandish ends that a critique of the Fordist mode of production emerges, along with its current relegation to mainly female and migrant workers – usually, but not always, in parts of the world that are not North America or Europe. The labouring subject here seems caught up in an infernal feedback machine, with no question of ‘maintaining dignity’ when performing tasks so labour-intensive and yet so silly. The abstruse nature of these tasks and the remorseless chain of logistics in which they function reflect on the absurdity of all labour which would claim to be ‘productive’, done by a worker yet standing against her or him

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- 12 For an overview on the major strands of Italian Autonomist Marxism, aside from such publications as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) or Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2001), see the recently reprinted Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (eds.), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007 (originally published in 1980).
 - 13 Theodor W. Adorno, quoted in Stewart Martin, ‘The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity’, *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 146, November–December 2007, p.15.
 - 14 Raniero Panzieri, ‘Surplus Value and Planning: Notes on a Reading of Capital’, in Julian Bees (ed.), *The Labour Process and Class Strategies*, London: Stage 1, 1976, p.9.
 - 15 Rube Goldberg was the archetypal American magus of the wacky and inventive, a cartoonist who designed many of the fiendishly complex machines (for example, a boot kicks a can, which rolls down a board which triggers a weight, which falls on the mouse, etc.) we are familiar with from Hanna-Barbera cartoons. The UK equivalent would be the ‘Heath Robinson contraption’, but there are many others, indicating a pan-national twentieth-century scepticism about machine civilisation. For a recent iteration, see Peter Fischli/David Weiss’s *Der Lauf der Dinge* (*The Way Things Go*, 1987), even less result-oriented than Goldberg’s machines.
 - 16 This scenario was often used by, for example, Lucille Ball in the sitcom *I Love Lucy*.



Mika Rottenberg,
Dough, 2005–06,
 video installation,
 7 min, stills. Courtesy
 the artist and Nicole
 Klagsbrun Gallery,
 New York

as an opaque power rather than a legible social effort. At the same time, it is a reflection on artistic labour, which can also be zany, labour-intensive and not ‘productive’ in any widely agreed or strictly economic sense of the word. Labour in *Dough* and labour in ‘sweatshops’ may not look so different, aside from the fact that the latter yields subsistence wages, and the video is part of an economy where productivity is measured differently. The dialectical condition of art in relation to its outside – that it can be only in relation to what it is not – is here turned inside out, so that the visualisation of labour in contemporary art has a politics to the extent that the futility of artistic and non-artistic labour is rendered common to both, but also that in the core of the work (the actions) whimsy and brutality are intertwined.

Yet, something else should be recognised first: that futility can never or not yet be seen as synonymous with escape. ‘Ornamental labour’ or ‘the labour of the concept’, thought through as modes of the presence of work in contemporary art, can signal that art and work, inasmuch as both have turned away from objects and to the production of experience, are as economic categories sites of conflict – but not for very political or liberating ones. A conception of work that embraces the subjective emphasis of artistic labour leads to the aporias that characterise the most reductive moments of the ‘immaterial labour’ discourse: namely, that once ‘creativity’ is directly enlisted as an ‘(un)productive force’ in value creation, labour can no longer be measured economically or controlled politically. This discourse often misidentifies a change in the global division of labour (the end of manufacturing labour within the mainstream of ‘developed’ societies) as a change in the *ontological* status of labour, much as the ‘de-materialisation’ of art production was identified with ‘de-commodification’.¹⁷ This, rather than a politics based in the everyday contradictions of capitalist work, would be another instance of the disappearance of labour from social visibility, this time affirmatively. Rottenberg’s video, by gleefully, theatrically, painstakingly telescoping the futility of work with its dominance, exposes the art field where this demonstration takes place as another site of its effects.

Physically, the working women don’t fit either: they press up against the confines of the spaces where they work, and their distress is pressed into production – a very large woman’s only job is to sniff a flower to which she is allergic, so that her tears, meandering down the entirety of her bulk to a special hole in the floor, drip down to moisten the dough. Another very tall woman incessantly walks to pump the bellows that aerates the dough. Such an image of production elides grinding menial labour and the disinterested nature of artistic labour as pictured by Kant’s ‘purposiveness without a purpose’. It just goes to show that repetitive moronic labour and whimsical creative work exist as moments in a total working process, a working process with a goal extraneous to it – the augmentation of surplus value. The same goes for artistic production, which results in fanciful objects and configurations which lampoon this alienation by converting it into another kind – an artist is reunited with the product of his or her labour, but, like the factory worker, is also cut off from the social consequences of his or her activity. For Rottenberg, like Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler or Mierle Laderman Ukeles – to name three precursors who parsed women’s labour with fine art – there is a synthesis between the kinds of work done by women (repetitive, devalued, invisible) and abstract labour as the condition of capitalist work (and art) in general. The latter was articulated in Mary Kelly, Kay Hunt and Margaret Harrison’s ‘Women and Work’ exhibition at the South London Gallery in 1972, where Conceptual art formats, with their formal mimesis of the stultifying repetitiveness of administered life, were correlated to documents testifying to the stultifying rhythms of factory work and domestic care for working-class women. Such materialist practices have been prescient for analyses of the contemporary inscription of subjectivity or self into economic processes, of the erosion of boundaries between

17 This has been most substantively developed by Antonio Negri, for example in ‘Value and Affect’, originally published in *Derive Approdi*, Issue 12/13, n.d., translated by Arianna Bove for Generation Online, <http://www.generation-online.org/t/valueaffect.htm> (last accessed on 20 July 2008). The latter point is summed up by Jacques Rancière in ‘From the Actuality of Communism to Its Inactuality’, an unpublished lecture given at the ‘Indeterminate Conference’, Johann Wolfgang Goethe University of Frankfurt in 2003: ‘Intellectual and artistic property did not vanish for all that. What happened instead is a displacement of the idea of artistic property itself... This means that intelligence as such takes the place of its products. But this means [also] a radicalisation of private property. Instead of dismissing private appropriation, the immateriality of concepts and images turns out to be its best refuge, the place where its reality is akin to its self-legitimation.’

production and reproduction, and the blurring of production and consumption with the expansion of the value form. The gendered and racialised division of labour that ensures a permanently squeezed and underpaid labour force is merely an extreme case of the *modus operandi* of all labour relations in capital, once work has been rendered invisible. (The ‘hidden’ work of women in the home always partook of this invisibility.) The inanity of the production line in *Dough*’s little enterprise could yet be posited as offering some kind of emancipatory gnosis. But it should be acknowledged that the idea that creativity exceeds the law of value is a dead-end when it comes to thinking how work could be reorganised or resisted. We see here the proximity of whimsical creativity and manual labour, ultimately indistinguishable as they are harnessed to an alien logic, be it the labour of the artist or the labour of the unskilled worker. Thus even or because the labour is worth more than the product in *Dough*, exceeding its nominal purpose it also shows a moment of suspension of the iron law of value at the affective level. There is obviously no social, economic or logical justification to what the women in the video are doing: their work is utterly absurd, and is perhaps driven by this absurdity, but there is a sense of aesthetic gratification at the ingenuity of it all. This parody carries the comic charge it does because there is something surreal and absurd about production lines, and we can more closely identify the bizarre actions as ‘actions’ rather than as useful labour, although this perception might be influenced by a degree of closeness to the experience of working on an assembly line. Instead of a moralising indignation at the terrible conditions ‘some’ people have to work in, *Dough* mobilises alienation from work as comedy, dry but annihilating. The dough workers enact a mobile tableau that evokes also Mario Tronti’s precept of resistance and refusal as implicit in workers’ passivity, and his notion of ‘organised alienation’ as the emergence of these implicit moments as political in acts of strike, sabotage and autonomous forms of social organisation.¹⁸ It also evokes Jean-François Lyotard when, throwing sand in the Marxian dialectic, he describes the worker’s complicity in her own exploitation as having its own libidinal rewards.¹⁹

Yvonne Rainer, *Act*,
Anderson Theater,
New York, 1968.
Showing Harry De Dio,
Barbara Dilley, Gay
Delanghe, Steve Paxton,
Becky Arnold, Bill Davis,
David Gordon and Yvonne
Rainer

Yvonne Rainer, *Stairs*,
Anderson Theater,
New York, 1968.
Showing David Gordon,
Steve Paxton and Yvonne
Rainer. Photographs:
Peter Moore; © Estate
of Peter Moore / VAGA,
New York

PERFORMANCE OF TASKS

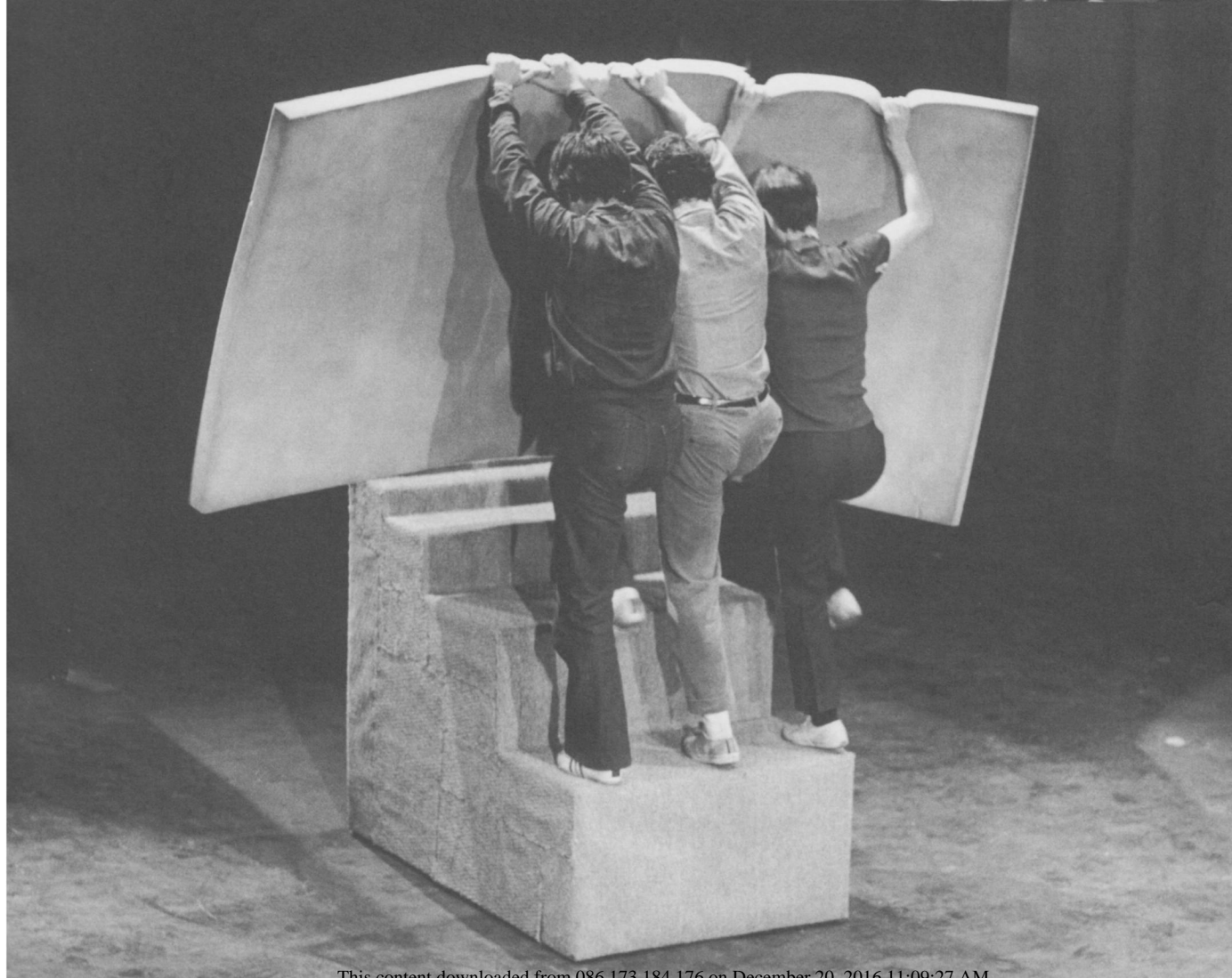
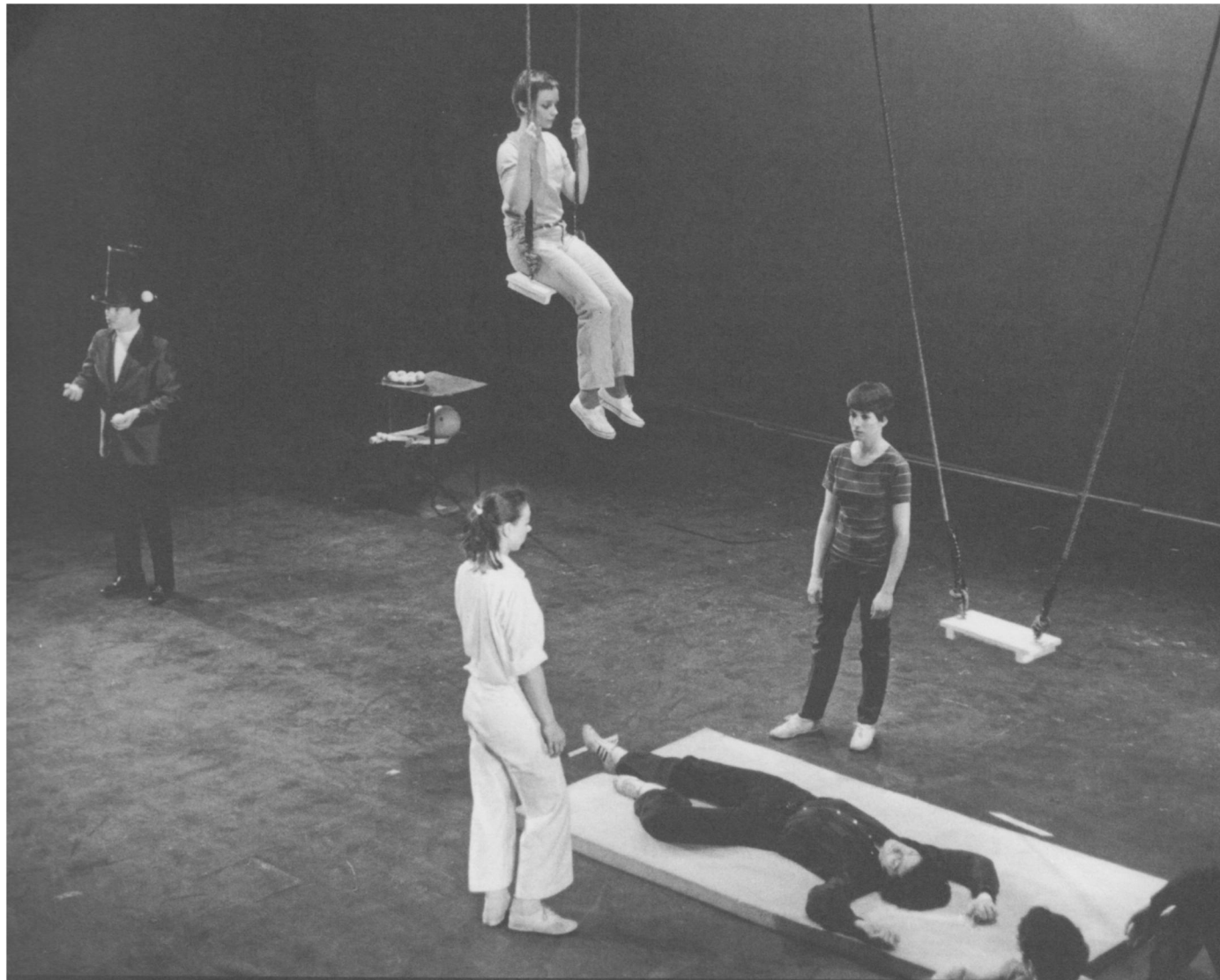
According to Jeff Wall’s genealogy in ‘Depiction, Object, Event’, what he calls ‘the movement arts’ – dance and performance – were among the first serious de-stabilisers of modernist medium-specificity, flouting Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried’s animosity to ‘theatricality’ as they abandoned their disciplinary confines to enter the frame of contemporary art proper. The field thus enlarged could then expand indefinitely, ushering in the ‘second appearance’ of practices at even a further remove from the ‘classical’ modernist forms of painting and sculpture. They did so under the broad church of the ‘Conceptual’, able to derive justification for their appearance in the art field via the gesture of naming and the social relations that established an art field where that naming could have force. With this possibility of ‘second appearance’, the distinction of social practices such as artistic labour and ordinary labour could only be sustained economically and institutionally, especially as the hallmarks of the former (imagination, singularity, creativity, adaptability) were endorsed and absorbed as desirable for all kinds of workers in all kinds of employment situations from the late 1960s onwards.

Here, ‘performance’ acquired a new capacity to be generalised as a normative attribute for the latter-day subject of capital. With the economic coordinates in the West (variably mirrored by the spectrum of artistic practices) shifting to management of information and experience over production of discrete industrial objects, the production of subjectivity became the new standard of the commodity form.²⁰ This then signals an indefinite sweep to the possibility of exchange-value in daily life (understood as what was formerly free for access and now needs to be paid for, and as what was

18 Mario Tronti, ‘Struggle Against Labor’, *Radical America*, vol.3, no.6, 1972, p.22. Tronti was one of the key figures of the Italian Autonomia theory and praxis.

19 Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (trans. I.H. Grant), London and New York: Continuum, 2004, pp.109–110. See also Anthony Iles, ‘I Like My Job’, *Inventory*, vol.5, no.1, 2004, also available at <http://saladofpearls.blogspot.com/2007/10/01/i-like-my-job/> (last accessed on 20 July 2008).

20 For one of the many discussions of this, see Anna Curico, ‘Along the Color Line: Racialization and Resistance in Cognitive Capitalism’, *dark matters*, February 2008, also available at <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2008/02/23/along-the-color-line-racialization-and-resistance-in-cognitive-capitalism/> (last accessed on 20 July 2008).



formerly valueless and can now be exchanged for money. The expansion of the commodity-form makes the boundaries of art and life porous, as each becomes constituted of experiences. This makes the art-into-life objectives of historical avant-gardes spurious in contemporary terms. Hence, another notion of 'performance' comes to the fore, one predicated both on standardisation and unrepeatability – efficiency and singularity. In this line, writers such as Giorgio Agamben and Paolo Virno refer to Aristotle's distinction between production and action in order to talk about the obsolescence of gesture in capitalist modernity and the coming into presence of the 'virtuoso' as the paradigm of contemporary work.²¹

Perhaps by now it is time to consider action more fully as a mode of being and of being productive in the present. To do this, I turn to the collapse of the distinction between work and action in Yvonne Rainer's notion of the 'task'. Extracting and analysing the task from the continuum of Rainer's innovations as a choreographer and practitioner seems to call for attention to the polarities and the tensions that constitute these innovations, starting from the paradox of 'everyday movement'. These might consist of immanence/representation; stillness/motion; continuity/heterogeneity (or, flow/montage) and prosaic/performative. The last may prove key to tracing a disjunction between everyday movement and its depiction that starts to loosen the grip of 'performance' as dogma of contemporary work – and which demands of every work to be 'performance-oriented', valuing the performance over the final product.

Rainer has noted that the dual emphasis on 'interaction and cooperation on one hand; substantiality and inertia on the other' was integral to her thinking about how to push modern dance away from emotional address and technical pageantry.²² Her goal was to elaborate a dance practice adequate to the focus on surface, process and participation that she drew from Minimalism, the industrial homogeneity and mass media of the 1960s Great Society America, and the desire for personal and collective change that were animating that era's oppositional politics. Such an emphasis might also be articulated in relation to, on the one hand, a seamless continuum of modulated energy within the dance and, on the other, the factory-like laboriousness of the 'task'.²³ The dancing body signified nothing beyond itself, and while the dancer eschewed eye contact with members of the audience, this literalness would itself be a form of communication, invoking the phenomenology of Minimalist sculpture. This dancing body communicating nothing but itself could thus be seen, curiously, as a *representation* of the self-sufficiency of a body unconscious or automatic in its movements. The uninflected motion of such a body, aspiring to objecthood, would seem to mirror or traverse both production and action – production insofar as the body produced itself as an object, action insofar as the movement did not have an extraneous end. It thus articulated the diminished subjecthood of a worker performing industrial quantities of repetitive movements, and the dancer as an expanded subject, bringing in the heterogeneous in the form of street life, mass media, political assembly, physical inertia and the laws of physics into a dance – a democratic anybody-whatever refusing to function as the mobile ornament or 'exhibitionist' Rainer deplored in modern dance. If the 'movement arts' succeeded in skewing the frame of contemporary art as it entered its Conceptual and post-Conceptual conditions, then Rainer sought to similarly displace the self-referentiality of modern dance, with techniques inspired by Minimalism or not – in *Trio A* (1966) there was a magician, as well as both a film and trapeze component.

The task in Rainer's dance, understood as the unstable nexus of the everyday or the literal with representation and virtuosity, could be approached, in line with the concerns of this text, as a difference between 'abstract labour' (undifferentiated potential to do any kind of work, labour power as such) and 'real subsumption' (the direct mobilisation of specific knowledges, desires and affects for accumulation of capital). The task can

21 Giorgio Agamben, in his essay 'Notes on Gesture', quotes Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: 'For production (*poiesis*) has an end other than itself, but action (*praxis*) does not: good action is itself an end.' Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.49. See also Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (trans. I. Bertoletti, J. Cascaito and A. Casson), New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004, p.47.

22 See Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind is a Muscle*, London: Afterall Books, 2007.

23 Carrie Lambert, 'Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*', *October*, vol.89, Summer 1999, also available at http://ubu.com/papers/Rainer-Yvonne_Mediating-Yvonne-Rainers.pdf (last accessed on 20 July 2008).

be undertaken by the material, refractory body upon other material, refractory bodies (in Rainer's dances, lifting a mattress with others, etc.), an ability that can be put into practice in whatever the situation calls for; on another level, it is precisely the ability to perform this capacity – this adaptability, awareness or flexibility – which counts in the dance. Likewise, interaction and cooperation, on the one hand, are vital for surplus value production, but also presupposed by any form of collective political organisation that would resist this ordering. This collective potential has been theorised as the becoming-communist of capital by those who seek a 'multitude' in unforeseen levels of global exploitation. There, the subjective moment of refusal is not taken into account; instead, it is glossed as a tendency deriving from the technical composition of work rather than a combination of political forces. In Rainer's dance pieces, the immanence of daily movement and its commonsensical aspect are combined with the depiction of that movement as a collective orchestration (guided by Rainer herself). This discloses an oscillation that envisions the political as theatre while abjuring theatricality in its aesthetics. It is a theatre of mundane 'tasks' that are emptied of any teleology, standing to be revealed as contingent. But the 'abstract potential' that emerges is also the subjectivity that, given a politics adrift, produces itself as exquisite and improvised value.²⁴ In terms of the relation between poesis and praxis, the obliqueness of the transition between art and life, or between phases of a choreography, dissolves in Rainer's work into a consistency of everyday. The discreteness of 'works' in art or 'work' as a delimited section of life gives way to the unlimited character of 'work' as a performance, caught between interaction as service (functional interaction) or as the social relations that deflect the commodity; between inertia understood as passivity and inertia as antagonism; between cooperation as spectacle and cooperation against the spectacle. Catherine Wood has written how, for Rainer, it was 'the performative situation only, perhaps, that might – for the performing modern subject that Rainer represented – collapse the activities of doing and thinking, into a single present instant'.²⁵ While this could be taken as an example of what Paolo Virno has termed 'virtuosity', it is a collapse which solicits a radicalism that can remain internal to its dialectic of immanence and representation without the 'public sphere' that can take heed of it, a public sphere which would augur a political composition attuned to the moment of refusal of this collapsing as all-pervasive 'work', and a way of organising social relations that confront and exceed the commodity form.

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The outcome of this exploration seems to be what it presupposed, namely, that work is an issue for art. But what constitutes an issue? Not simply a problematic; the presence of work within art is a symptom of art's internalised proximity to its outside, what makes discrete social performances legible as 'art' or not, a constant tension between an instance of 'art' and an instance of something else, and how those claims emerge. The relationship of art to what is extraneous to it, and how this is determined is something the instances of art must simultaneously disavow and tackle in order to cement their grounding in the 'real' while counteracting this 'real', the separation that reflexive art is constrained to uphold or dissolve into. Moreover, work comes back as a fetish in art once it is expunged from the social imaginary, partially as an attempt to countervail the gravity of a marketplace that claims an intimate kinship between art and money as forms of self-valorising value. The full consequences of the relationship of art to the commodity form via the fetish have been elaborated, if not by Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, then by philosophers working in that critical tradition.²⁶ These have pointed out that the compensatory character of the fetish with respect to a rigid and unknowable social reality can also, through its sensuous and non-arbitrary character, disrupt the rationality of exchange-value that structures that reality. For Marx, it is the fetish character of the commodity that reveals in a microcosm the social relations while at the

24 'Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.' K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, *op. cit.*, p.167.

25 C. Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind is a Muscle*, *op. cit.*, p.65.

26 See S. Martin, 'The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity', *op. cit.*

same time occluding them, and revealing that occlusion as fundamental. A more lucid restatement of the foregoing theses could not be demanded.

This symptomatology has other qualities than the ones so far discussed, registering 'work' as a condition of existential insecurity that migrates into the 'work of art' as a contingent production pegged to the whims of market and state, when not reflecting on the artist as an 'incidental person' in the transformation of work.²⁷ In many of these instances, the 'conceptual reduction' operates not as a passport for heterogeneous social content to enter the parameters of art practice, but as a way to compound the permeability of art work and non-art types of work in capital, and the vulnerability and the opportunities this heralds, often with a reference to personal experiences of economic instability as an artist and observations of the traffic between cultural and financial capital. Some instances could be projects such as Rachel Baker's *Art of Work: Temporary Recruitment Agency for Artists* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 1999, for which Baker ran a temping agency that brokered connections between artistic practices and private capital; Rachel Koolen's ongoing engagement with the restructuring of Dutch social services as brokers for flexible labour, using photography to document institutional archives and the changing layout of the job centre offices; and Tatiana Trouvé's *Bureau of Implicit Activities (BAI)* (1997–ongoing), a modular archive of all her bids to sustain her existence through official channels on her arrival in Paris – a bestiary of self-administration, job applications, funding requests and project proposals, which also functions as an installation. Additionally, the remits of 'relational aesthetics' can be subverted through the unmasking of what its apparent revitalisation of the social programmatically excludes: the social relations of working, as opposed to networking. In 1996's *Middelburg Summer*, Jens Haaning found a textile factory situated on the outskirts of a small Dutch resort town and persuaded the factory managers to simply move it inside the art centre that had commissioned Haaning to do a project. A cut-and-paste strategy was adopted; the entire factory hall with all its equipment was successfully transplanted into the space of the art centre and carried on its usual functions – the only modification was that the workers would be compensated for any working time lost in conversation with exhibition visitors. Here, the art centre that was intended to function as an emblem of the post-industrial economy was solicited to confront the 'repressed' – the Turkish migrant factory workers. Rather than the stage for a 'second appearance' implied in current formulations of the museum as a democratic redoubt, the art institution was turned into a container for a social phenomenon that could not be framed within a representational content or held hostage by culture-led urban redevelopment.

What these several approaches seem to hold in common is a diligent rigour when it comes to exploiting contradictions. This kind of practice is undoubtedly informed by the endless opacities of the 'conceptual reduction', but doesn't allow them to dissolve into ambiguity. In this sense, the articulation of abstract labour with art is productive not when work and art emerge as universal forms of mobile and pliant subjectivity, but when their combination results in a determined negation of their value-producing potential.

27 The idea of the 'incidental person' was central to the programme of the Artist Placement Group (APG), initiated by John Latham and Barbara Steveni in 1966 to field-test the reciprocal impact of artistic subjectivity and organisational structures in business, government and communities. Widely cited as a 'precursor' to the artist-in-residence system, Steveni has always contested this interpretation of APG's aims. See 'Countdown to Zero, Count Up to Now (An Interview with the Artist Placement Group)', *Mute*, 28 November 2002, also available at <http://www.metamute.org/en/Countdown-to-Zero-Count-up-to-Now-An-interview-with-the-Artist-Placement-Group> (last accessed on 20 July 2008).

28 See Rachel Baker, 'Business Plan for Art of Work', in Cornelia Sollfrank (ed.), *Next Cyberfeminist International Reader*, Hamburg: Old Boys Network, 1999, also available at http://www.obn.org/obn_pro/downloads/reader2.pdf (last accessed on 20 July 2008).