

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens: *Putting Life to Work*

Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal

Feb. 18 – April 16, 2016

by *Gentiane Bélanger*

Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens' *Putting Life to Work* presents a strong – albeit paradoxical – injunction: To let go of our desire to be productive, and to find meaning in our actions beyond the reductionist binary of failure and success. This principle of non-productivity traverses the history of their collaborative practice and a larger part of their *corpus* – an observation guest curator Véronique Leblanc is eager to bring forth in this exhibition.

Leblanc situates *Putting Life to Work* in relation to the idea of cognitive capitalism, where the complexities of life are reduced to a one-dimensional productivist imperative. The so-called creative class is often considered a standard bearer of cognitive capitalism and work–leisure integration. Leblanc reads Ibghy and Lemmens' conceptual materialism as an attempt to reconstitute the richness of life, which falls between the cracks of imposed models of productivity, framing this attempt as an act of political resistance. She emphasizes the corporeality of their practice, wherein the body is simultaneously treated as a depository for internalized ideologies, and as a potential site for overturning embedded ideologies.

Putting Life to Work is structured around the critical appropriation of abstract representations of human labour and corporeal experimentations in non-doing. Half of the works on display, including *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation* (2016), *The Many Ways to Get What You Want* (2011/2016) and *Diagrams Concerning the Representation of Human Time* (2009), speak to Ibghy and Lemmens' interest in diagrammed forms. This part of the exhibition presents

an epistemological inquiry into rationalized configurations of knowledge, and the distillation of reality's rich complexity into a reductionist language. Forms of data visualization like graphs, charts and diagrams shape our knowledge of the world in a rhetorical way. They are not merely a reflection of the real – as if ontologically separate – but a conceptual space that constructs meaning out of phenomenal reality. Ibghy and Lemmens present a constant shift between abstract thought and concrete forms, as occurs in *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation*, where abstract visualizations of labour efficacy are re-materialized as delicately crafted sculptures. Countless graphs, meticulously built with acetate, thread and wood skewers, and propped up on makeshift tables throughout the main gallery, are reminders of the careful narratives and rhetorical power produced by visualized data.

An art historical paradox percolates at the surface of this work, as its aesthetic is strongly reminiscent of Russian Constructivism – a movement that was notoriously infatuated with a productivist ideal. For the Constructivists, the world order epitomized by modernity and its sweeping tendency to rationalize labour and social structures was liberation from the stifling embrace of tradition. Ibghy and Lemmens overturn this ethos, but by way of recourse to a similar aesthetic, thus undermining the pervasiveness of productivism through all realms of human desire and social behaviour.

The same goes with *Real Failure Needs No Excuse* (2012), a series of filmed and interleaved performances enacted by Lemmens in an abandoned office building, where she undertakes the Sisyphean task of endlessly stacking office furniture into precarious constructions that inevitably crumble down. Throughout the film are suspended moments when these structures hold, for a time, their angular mixture of disparate materials resonating with Vladimir Tatlin's turn-of-the-century counter-reliefs. But again, *a contrario* to the Russian avant-garde's apology of progress, the somewhat incidental formalism that emerges from this piece is meant as a stumbling block to productivism and a celebration of its dismissal.

Selected by Leblanc for its corporeal exploration of non-productivity, *Is There Anything Left to be Done*



Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation*, 2016, detail, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

at All? (2014/2016) was produced in close collaboration with four other artists: choreographer Justine A. Chambers, visual artist Kevin Rodgers, community-engaged artist Rodrigo Martí and singer Ryan Tong. It consists of an experiment held in four parts, where each artist enacts prescribed recalcitrance to productivity in his/her own medium. Presented in a single contiguous space, the films blend into one another to form an endless cycle with no tangible results – other than the process itself. The sounds, images and objects from each session form an immersive context, punctuated by the regularity of a metronome, the sweet melancholia of a refrain, shuffling sounds and sporadic laughter. The absence of productivity turns out to be surprisingly comfortable – soothing, actually. It is tempting to linger in this convivial refuge, cradled by repetitive noises and contaminated by the enthusiastic business of non-doing.

The performance work of Ibhgy and Lemmens points to a sustained practice of unlearning productivity, resisting the comfort zones of know-how, avoiding efforts at optimization and embracing the deterritorializing horizon of incompetence. Highly proficient in the world of art,¹ Ibhgy and Lemmens find an exhilarating sense of freedom in non-doing. Véronique Leblanc shares with the artist duo a fascination for a meaningful world outside of productivity. This is perhaps the most convincing sign that all three are active participants in a post-industrial economy, where individuals cannot find refuge from productivity. One can only crave standing “outside” when occupying a fully integrated and functional stance. Anyone who struggles to integrate society at its full speed knows the violence of such exclusion. The crucial factor separating Leblanc, Ibhgy and Lemmens from actual unproductive outcasts is intentionality, as intentionality is power.

This contradiction can be sensed in the art world’s propensity to question – while fully partaking in – capitalist power dynamics from the standpoint of an expanded institutional critique. In the early 2000s, Andrea Fraser acknowledged the conundrum faced by art forms undermining the very conditions that allowed their existence. In the face of what appeared like an intellectual impasse, Fraser framed the question from a different angle, arguing that we cannot be against the institution since, “we are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.”² Provided that the “institution” referred to by Fraser becomes the imperative of productivity in Leblanc’s curation, and in Ibhgy and Lemmens’ practice, the on-going issue shifts from complete avoidance of productivity to a questioning of the trap it has become in our lives and how it has come to exert violence on our existence. We shall never stop producing, but we shall produce more sensibly.

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¹ Rising stars in Canada, Ibhgy and Lemmens have a manifest international success. Following their exhibition at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, another solo exhibition is planned for the Esker Foundation (May 28 – August 28, 2016), and their work has been shown at the 14th Istanbul Biennial (2015), La Biennale de Montréal (2014), Toronto’s 27th Images Festival (2014), Manif d’art 7: Quebec City Biennial (2014) and other international venues.

² Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” in *Artforum*, vol. 44, no. 1 (September 2005), 105.

Leya Evelyn: *It’s Not What You Think*

Saint Mary’s University Art Gallery, Halifax

April 1 – May 29, 2016

by Jane Affleck

A member of Halifax’s art community since she relocated from New York more than 30 years ago, Leya Evelyn has had a busy season, with an exhibition in Ottawa followed by this one at the Saint Mary’s University Art Gallery. In Halifax, she presented two distinct bodies of work, site-specific to each of the gallery’s two spaces. Both are from the family tree of abstraction, but are distant cousins with differing aesthetics and scales.

In the gallery’s main space are several large-scale oil paintings with subtle, muted colours: planes of buttercream and lightly toasted marshmallow are partitioned by lines and marks in other hues, such as ultramarine, aqua, emerald, forest and dusty purple. These solemn, calming works command the viewer to spend time looking, from afar and up close. The latter — from a standpoint within sniffing distance of the textured surfaces — rewards the viewer with sightings of fabric swatches beneath the palimpsest application of paints.

Evelyn’s skill in layering these materials creates realms beyond the textured surfaces. In several paintings, swarms of scribbled brushwork hover above fields or seascapes of ochre-tinted cream, sometimes appearing to be reflected there and to exist on a plane other than the painting’s. Similarly, the colours and forms in *When, No. 2* push and pull, establishing spaces: a plane of milky lemon melts into cream at a sepia-toned horizon — perhaps a glowing sun setting (or rising) behind a bank of fog over a bridge. This painting in particular evokes the misty tumult of J.M.W. Turner’s later paintings, such as *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844), produced after he had relinquished objectivity to better focus on the essential qualities and capabilities of paint: colour and texture, and the alchemy of reproducing light itself.

Evelyn’s work traces its lineage through Abstract Expressionism, though it shares few traits with “Zombie Formalism,” a flash-in-the-pan and lifeless revival of Clement Greenberg’s aesthetic.¹ Her inclusion of collaged fabric countermands the necessary purity of materials lauded by Greenberg, who stated that “[i]t is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself.”² Regardless, the fabric swatches’ contribution isn’t entirely about their materiality but their patterns. Perhaps to this end, the artist chose to leave fragments of the patterns exposed amidst the layers of paint: squares and polka dots; amphibians; French horns; and the word “love” in peacenik-style font. This text—legible in several of the paintings—links the work to other forebears of non-figurative mid-20th-century art, from Robert Indiana’s *LOVE* sculpture to Ed Ruscha’s paintings, many of which feature a word as both subject and content. But why these machine-manufactured icons and text, in work so concerned with the painter’s