

BREACH

Ways Out from Inside: Towards the Un-Productive in the Work of Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens

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In 2012, Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens rented studio space in a former office building in Glasgow that was to be reconstituted as a condominium complex at some point in the future. Very likely they were able to access this piece of real estate while it awaited rebirth as an urban dwelling because of its intermediary identity. The building's in-between-ness granted the artists the possibility to engage irreverently with its residual office-contents for their video *Real Failure Needs No Excuse* (2012). In the work, Ibgby and Lemmens labour to reject the injunctions of productivity contained in the very materiality of the left-over office objects and, more challenging still, to excise their/our own internalized and morality-entwined compulsion to produce. The provenance of the space is necessarily significant for the duo whose practice considers the history of an economy that has changed from industrial to post-industrial production, or from Fordist (so named for Henry Ford who introduced the assembly line in his factories) to post-Fordist.

Christian Marazzi, first writing in 1994, explains the shift: “While in Fordism...there was the need for a specialized workforce, parceled to the point of repeating the same movement all day long, in post-Fordism the ‘ideal’ workforce has a high degree of adaptability, in response to changes in rhythm and function” [1]. The change in economic paradigms replaces factory with office, so that the phone, scanner, computer and so on become the preeminent instruments wielded in the pursuit of productivity. More recently, Isabell Lorey writes, “[T]he form of labour that is currently becoming hegemonic, one that demands the whole person, is primarily based on communication, knowledge and affect, and becomes visible in a new way as virtuoso labour” [2]. This conception of labour as implicating the “whole person” speaks to the interconnectedness of self and work, such that personal and professional actualization are symbiotically ensconced. If every “whole person” is defined through their work, then by extension, so too is the whole society. In this way, “virtuoso labour” becomes contemporary credo.



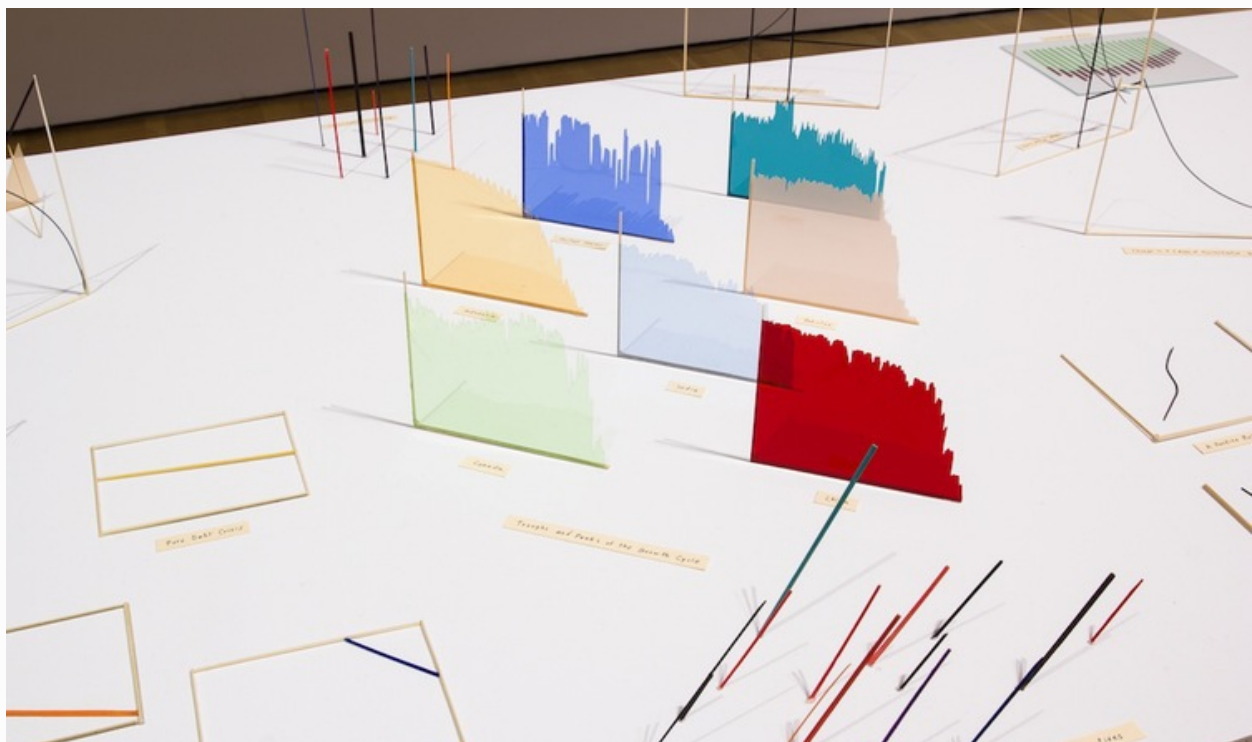
The conceit of the office replacing the Fordist factory as the primary site of labour fails to take into account the nature of work today: no longer bound to delimited space or time. The home is co-opted as a site of productivity in equal measure with the office, and Ibgby and Lemmens have drawn on materials originating from the home for several of their works addressing labour and economy. For example, *The Prophets* (2013 – ongoing) translates hundreds of economic graphs and charts from the two-dimensional Cartesian plane into tiny, fragile sculptures built from household materials like wooden barbecue skewers, string, wire and the mesh of produce packaging. This tendency to gesture to the domestic through materials or location is not forced for Ibgby and Lemmens so much as it is given, logical or even imposed by the circumstances of their projects, as in their exhibition *Is there anything left to be done at all?* For this show, which took place following a month-long residency at Trinity Square Video in 2014, Ibgby and Lemmens invited four artists to join them in an exercise similar to that of *Real Failure Needs No Excuse*, where they would explore the potential for work that was not aimed at productivity. One of the artists, Rodrigo Marti, moved most of the contents out of his apartment and into Trinity Square Video, so that Ibgby and Lemmens were working with the givens of the gallery and its furniture/objects as well as those of the artist’s home. At Marti’s behest, his possessions were mobilized into wobbly blanket-fort assemblages and other accumulations, suggesting a return to play as an alternative to product. Fundamentally transitory and without end, Marti’s strategy recalls something of the temporary and teetering constructions in Ibgby and Lemmens’ *Real Failure*, as well as the

fragility rendered in *The Prophets*. We might imagine the data represented by *The Prophets* giving way to sheer material tenuousness and collapsing like so many blanket-forts.

lbghy and Lemmens' use of the former office and future condominium building in Glasgow as a studio, for the purposes of doing art *work*—even if this work is painstakingly oriented away from a productive conclusion—points to the overlap between office and home as it concerns the spaces where artists work. In post-industrial modes of production, a quality of indeterminacy replaces the fixity of the previous paradigm of industrial production [3]. lbghy and Lemmens point to this indeterminacy in their projects that collapse office, gallery and home, emphasizing the body as



a place where productivity has been internalized. In approaching questions of productivity and alternatives to it, the artists position themselves within spaces that are organized and defined around the very perpetuation of productivity. lbghy and Lemmens assert that the type of work artists do today is not exempt from the broader systems of economy and labour that all workers negotiate. In this way, *Real Failure* implicates the tools of the office as the tools of the artist. “Virtuoso labour” becomes a perfect characterization of the work of artists, and how, in inverse, all workers are now expected to work as artists insofar as adaptability, uncertainty and productivity are concerned. Hito Steyerl, acknowledging that there was an earlier point in history when art had “a special status within the bourgeois capitalist system because artists somehow refused to follow the specialization required by other professions”, writes that, “The example of the artist as creative polymath now serves as a role model (or excuse) to legitimate the universalization of professional dilettantism and overexertion” [4]. This notion of the inextricability of artist from an all-encompassing system of professionalism and vice versa is of central concern to lbghy and Lemmens. Because, as artists, they are embedded firmly in the larger system (as we all are), their work necessarily examines economy, labour and productivity from the internal perspective of participant.





At the core, an understanding of the professionalization of the artist as something to be wary of motivates Ibgby and Lemmens' work. Still, the alternative—the prior historical point that Steyerl refers to (when artists existed outside of the capitalist system)—is hardly an arrangement to be wished for. Anton Vidokle writes that maintaining the artist as outsider “condemn[s] artists to a precarious and often alienating place in the day-to-day relations that hold other parts of society together” [5]. In contrast, the demand to professionalize seems to threaten our fundamental understanding of what art is; that “somewhere close to the center of what we all know art to be, there is a kind of open, undefined quality” [6]. Yet, writes Vidokle, “As artists, curators, and writers, we are increasingly forced to market ourselves by developing a consistent product, a concise presentation, a statement that can be communicated in thirty seconds or less—and oftentimes this alone passes for professionalism” [7]. *With Real Failure Needs No Excuse* and *Is there anything left to be done at all?* Ibgby and Lemmens eschew productivity and not necessarily work or labour. The latent “product” contained in the term that the duo seeks to circumvent is that which is promised by the standardization, predictability and correctness of professionalization. Ibgby and Lemmens call into question the rote product of professionalism, invoking the same quality of indeterminacy that infects production and productivity today by repositioning it at the centre of art practice. There is a way in which the quality of indeterminacy essential to the project of art can be distinguished from that which seeks productivity. It emanates from a position of interiority, or “close to the center,” as Vidokle’s statement tenders. Conversely, Ibgby and Lemmens have discussed the need to suspend any form of expectation applied from the outside in order to impede the finality of the product and the judgment of it as successful or unsuccessful [8]. Of course, differentiating between expectations that are externally applied and those that lie at the center is nearly impossible when work and self are wholly collapsed and the external impulse has been internalized. Ibgby and Lemmens and their participants manage to isolate the strategies of circularity, continuousness and interruption in their explorations of unproductive labour, but the most powerful and potentially most corruptible strategy that they found—of ceasing to work when one ceases to care—has to rely upon the artist’s internal constitution.

Real Failure Needs No Excuse edits together segments of Lemmens’ attempts to do un-productive labour performed in a number of spaces throughout the building at various, non-sequential times of day. The building and the objects therein provide the material with which the exercise is performed. Again, the performances do not aim at non-work; in fact, Lemmens is really *doing* in a way that emphasizes her embodiment and the potential for the exhaustion of her body. She improvisationally piles up materials—pieces of office light fixtures, 2 x 4s, a standing fan, a waste basket, movable walls, a scanner, dry-erase markers and so on—in precarious constructions that wobble and often collapse. There is no goal or expectation, so the collapse does not signal failure; it just becomes a position from which another move follows.



At the same time, Lemmens’ constant action in the video parallels the unabating propulsion of productivity that ceaselessly demands more and more work. Continuous action eliminates the moment of pause or conclusion wherein efforts can be judged as successful or not. With the objective removed, the focus is taken off of futurity and imbued instead in each moment and each action. This resistance to the teleological is critical in the context of post-industrial capitalism

premised on growth and the “modern conception of the future as infinite expansion” [9]. In considering a

project that seeks to get beyond the desire to be good or successful or productive, it is useful to first establish what productivity and the compulsion for expanded productivity means in the post-Fordist landscape. Franco Bifo Berardi explains that this is essentially a problem of accelerating the “infosphere,” which he defines as “the environment where information races toward the brain,” and there are limits to its expansion. Berardi continues, “Cognition takes time. Think of what attention is. Attention is the activation of physical reactions in the brain, and also of emotional, affective reactions. Attention cannot be infinitely accelerated” [10]. Ibgby and Lemmens seek to call into question these paradigms of success/failure and productivity that inflect all aspects of our lives in order to determine what other impulses might move us. The strategy put forward in *Real Failure* puts the body to work, physically thinking through resistance to our overtaxed/overtasked/overextended attention.



Circling back to the discussion of the historical moment prior to artists’ professionalization, let us consider how artists existed outside of normative bounds of other vocations. Anton Vidokle reflects,

“...this emphasis on professionalization emerged simultaneously with the disappearance of bohemia, which is usually described as a shared creative space that allowed for fluid communication between poets, artists, dancers, writers, musicians, and so forth. The notion of bohemia as something to aspire to went out the window a few decades ago; it vanished at the same time as the visual art sphere was becoming more segregated from other fields of art. ...The bohemian artist would absolutely reject the notion of professionalism in the arts—this was something for lawyers, accountants, and bankers, not artists. [11]

During their residency at Trinity Square Video, Ibgby and Lemmens briefly reestablished something of this fluid communication between different kinds of artists. They invited Justine Chambers, Kevin Rodgers, Rodrigo Marti and Ryan Tong—a dancer/choreographer, social-practice artist, sculptor and hardcore singer, respectively—to collaboratively workshop the possibilities of non-productivity. Allowing for the indistinguishability of the artist from other professionals, the diverse group of artists whom Ibgby and

Lemmens gathered in the space of the gallery (a space designed around showing the results of artistic labour) also assembled something of the lawyer, accountant and banker, signaling that contemporary bohemia is neither a possibility nor an alternative to the hyper-productive demands of our present. As Vidokle continues: “Today it would be rather futile to try to reconstitute bohemia—the free-flowing, organic creative space—because it never really existed within the constellation of institutions of art, the art market, and the art academy” [12]. It is meaningful that the process by which lbghy and Lemmens assembled the four artists for the residency consisted of email exchanges, Skype meetings, and, as one of the invited artists mentioned in a Q and A, due to lbghy and Lemmens’ previous professional experience at a residency with him [13]. lbghy and Lemmens had no intention of reconstituting bohemia at Trinity Square Video. The artists pointedly acknowledge the impossibility of truly and wholly avoiding productivity, and accept the contradictions in their projects that seek to eliminate it. Their video *Real Failure Needs No Excuse* can be thought of as a “product” as can the exhibition *Is there anything left to be done at all?* But, to focus on these obvious paradoxes and to do nothing at all is too easy an out. The video and the exhibition are offered to the public as residues of the process rather than resolved art objects. For the artists, the responsibility to share their explorations outstrips the desire for conceptual unassailability—perhaps in a way that actually comes closer to destabilizing the compulsion for perfection and completeness.



[1] Marazzi, Christian. *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*. Semiotext(e). Los Angeles: 2011, pg. 23-24.

[2] Lorey, Isabel. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Verso. London: 2015, pg. 5.

[3] Berardi, Franco “Bifo”. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. Semiotext(e). Los Angeles: 2012, pg. 86.

[4] Steyerl, Hito. “Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life.” *e-flux journal*: #30, 2011. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life-12/>>. Accessed July 26 2015.

[5] Vidokle, Anton. “Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art.” *e-flux journal*: #43, 2013. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-market-art-without-education-political-economy-of-art/>>. Accessed July 26, 2015.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Ibid.

[8] Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens. Images Festival Artist Talk "Is there anything left to be done at all", Trinity Square Video, Toronto. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS8S6bO6cTY>>.

[9] Berardi, pg. 76.

[10] Berardi, pg. 97

[11] Vidokle, Anton. "Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art." e-flux journal: #43, 2013. <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-market-art-without-education-political-economy-of-art/>>. Accessed July 26, 2015.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens. Images Festival Artist Talk "Is there anything left to be done at all", Trinity Square Video, Toronto. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS8S6bO6cTY>>.

Shannon Garden-Smith is a Toronto based artist and MFA candidate at the University of Guelph beginning in Fall 2015. Her practice investigates the potentialities of surface often using lowest-common-denominator commercial printing technologies to echo the way in which the rhetoric of the screen directs the material condition of our lives.
