

## ARTISTIC LABOUR AS A COGNITIVE LABORATORY

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*This text accompanies the exhibition Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens: Putting Life to Work.*

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*Curator: Véronique Leblanc*

Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens' art practice investigates the ways in which the economic sciences and the theories of management represent the world. Taking an approach that is both conceptual and pragmatic, grounded in a process of research and relying on the subversion of ordinary experience, the duo seeks to disclose and disarm the influence of neoliberalism's ideology on the most private facets of our lives. The notion of work, seen through the lens of its recent transformations, is central to Ibgby & Lemmens' approach, as it embodies what Michel Foucault defined as *biopower*, that is, the capacity of economic thought to control, direct and orient the life of human beings.<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition of works produced since 2009 explores the critical relationship between the artists' practice and the internalization of the logic of productivity. The works examine the ways in which the injunction to perform affects the body—actions, thought, attitudes, language—from the point of view of work and life, two spheres that tend to be conflated within a model that many researchers refer to as “cognitive capitalism.”<sup>2</sup> The works underline the physiological, subjective and cognitive dimensions of the body and is a central element in the artists' critical stance against neoliberalism's ideology. Due to its physical boundaries, as well as the important social and affective components of

human activity, the body cannot be reduced to economic models and to the logic of growth, both of which increasingly determine its conditions for existing. Thus, the works of Ibgby & Lemmens define the body, both as the site where the mechanisms of productivity are realized and as an agent of their disabling.

### **The Irreducibility of the Human Experience**

Some of the works shown in this exhibition focus on the processes of abstraction inherent to statistical analysis and on the visual representation of data referring to human activity. The artists set up paradoxical relationships between the visual language of quantification models (graphs, diagrams) and other forms that express human behaviour not accounted for by economic theory.

As an introductory piece to the exhibition, the sculpture installation *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation* (2016) reproduces the shapes of more than a hundred diagrams used to gauge human productivity from the second half of the 19th Century to the present day. In recalling various moments in the history of labour from the perspective of productivity, this work traces the development of thinking around optimization and performance that emerged in industrial and, later, professional culture, from Taylorism to Post-Fordism. The most recent advances in cognitive capitalism have seen this logic of efficiency expand its influence to all areas of human experience. The sculptures show the optimized movements of a factory worker as envisioned in Taylorist thinking of the Industrial Age, as well as some of the more recent performance assessment criteria in the context of post-industrial labour, such as innovation and exchanges. Stripped of the variables and data that would allow the graphs to be interpreted, the sculptures appear instead as abstract shapes. As such, they echo another process of abstraction: one operated by the diagram itself with regard to the human dimension of the phenomenon that it depicts. The title of the installation seeks precisely to resituate human life at the centre of productivity, proposing, with a dose of humour, inhalation and exhalation as measurement units. Besides introducing a

fluctuating variable into the graphs, which claim to be objective, this reference to breathing may refer to the subjection of the body to the pace of production in contemporary forms of work, in which servitude has of course taken on a different face, but where the requirement to perform retains its tight grip.

Less directly related to the world of work, the installation *The Many Ways to Get What You Want* (2011) employs language to address how our decisions are calculated. Dozens of behaviours are depicted on a wall-mounted diagram based on a graduated scale encompassing, on the one hand, knowing or not knowing what we want and, on the other, knowing or not knowing how to get it. This matrix of attitudes, which includes “pretend there is no alternative,” “always look disappointed,” “flip a coin,” and “camouflage your determination,” allows the viewer to interpret various strategies for rationalizing personal choices according to economic parameters. It shows how the pursuit of objectives—e.g., aspiring to success, the lure of money, applying the principle of least effort—dictates behaviours and acts on social relations, all the while widening the spectrum of actions to include non-prescribed attitudes. In so doing, it transfers the logic of efficiency to a territory marked by individualism and more or less stated forms of competitiveness.

The series of screen prints entitled *Diagrams Concerning the Representation of Human Time* (2009) also proceeds from a visual rationalization exercise, but examines a fundamental variable of productivity: time. Based on the same incompatibility between the ideas stated in the titles of the images and the meanings suggested by their visual transposition, this series allows the viewer simultaneously to grasp what is meant by the illustration and what is lost due to its simplification. While our human conception of time is largely based on its rational segmentation, its phenomenological dimension demands recourse to other types of language that more successfully express its complexity. Thus the figures set down on paper do not afford us contact with the qualities of temporal concepts like “now” or “absence of time.”<sup>3</sup> The notion of time, an essential variable in gauging performance, is present in the formal and narrative trajectories of every work in

the exhibition. Thus the “management of time,” in the sense of the way we “manage” our time, occupies a central role in the following works, because they propose viewing the time spent making art as time for thinking about the potential for its re-appropriation.

### **Transforming the Use of Time**

In an attempt to circumvent the effects of productivity from a more concrete perspective, Ibgby & Lemmens also develop performance-based projects that consist in conducting exploratory actions in places chosen for their association with immaterial labour (office, art gallery, domestic space). By manipulating objects and materials in relation to space, they create situations in which the objective is to observe, or even undo, certain behaviours that they subject to novel protocols. These projects set up, on the one hand, fictional situations in which a particular aspect of economic logic is taken to its extreme<sup>4</sup> and, on the other, periods of improvised actions seemingly bereft of any productive finality. In assigning central roles to improvisation and collaboration, the projects, upon completion of sessions of “non-productive work,” result in video pieces and installations.

An office building vacated by an insurance firm provided the venue for the first of these experiments. In *Real failure needs no excuse* (2012), Lemmens busies herself provoking random, incongruous juxtapositions of various furnishings and objects left at the scene, without regard for their normal function. The artist moves, pivots, lines up, balances, flips around and assembles everything she finds. Her improvised actions most often end in failure—but a failure that, precisely, must not be judged as such, for the point of the exercise is to eschew all productive ambition and evade the very principles of success and failure. The actions, constantly reiterated, construct an absurd Sisyphean realm in which all configurations are valid, expense of effort is the corollary of uselessness, and the constant renewal of abstract compositions invokes the flows of the capitalist system. If the artist here casts herself in the role of a “non-productive worker,” it is not so much from a perspective of refusal of work as it is based on the idea of resistance to the control exerted on her activity by the ideology of performance.<sup>5</sup> Thus

the stance is not one of inaction, nor even of dematerialization of the “product”, but of suggesting an experience to be shared: in this case, via a video piece. The static framing shows the actions unfolding as if they are part of a laboratory experiment. The editing creates a restructuring of space and time, suggesting simultaneous action by a single character in several places at once. This strategy underlines the profusion of seemingly pointless actions and lends the character a playful ubiquity.

During a 2014 residency at Trinity Square Video in Toronto,<sup>6</sup> Ibgby & Lemmens decided to continue their investigations into non-productive action, envisioning it this time from the perspective of artistic creation and adopting multiple approaches. Realized in an art production and exhibition venue, the project *Is there anything left to be done at all?* (2014) examines the meaning of the experience of non-productivity and how it manifests itself in the work of four artists from different disciplines, centred chiefly on performance (dance, music and community-based art). The attention paid to occurrences of productive thinking in each artist’s work allows us to envision different ways of approaching action so as to circumvent it—including inadequate gestures so as to disable it.<sup>7</sup> This more experiential approach, combining the artist’s learning with creation of an aesthetic form to be experimented with by the visitor,<sup>8</sup> aims to provoke thinking around what is at stake in our relationship to the task at hand, to our surroundings, and to work habits: the desire or lack of desire to do/make, the concentration mobilized for doing/making, the energy deployed, or the pleasure derived. By eschewing any demonstrative accounting for the work sessions, the installation offers the visitor another kind of experience, focused on repetition, slowness, and listening. It initiates a slowing-down via the re-appropriation of work-time stripped of the goal of productivity.

Time spent at work is also central to the scenario of *Visions of a Sleepless World* (2014), for which the artists imagined they had been commissioned by a pharmaceutical company to make a film about the effects of stimulant drugs, like Henri Michaux and his *Images du monde visionnaire* (1963).<sup>9</sup> Set in a more abstract space, which could be

envisioned as the space of thinking, this fiction sets up a proximate relationship to a woman tackling an intellectual task, who never has occasion to rest. In this narrative, which is about extending time dedicated to work and reducing that reserved for sleep, the body and gestures serve to make us see the abstract work of thinking. The character's interaction with a table, on which she arranges dozens of sheets of paper in a grid pattern, alludes to the Cartesian organization of thought. The path of her gaze across this object allows us to observe attention being paid to something, hesitation, comparison, interrogation and expectation, while a host of unconscious gestures reveal a form of nervousness, of disorder or of struggle, manifested when the preoccupation with efficiency and optimization encounters the physiological limits of the body. This way of responding to the interiorization of neoliberalism's ideology by way of the materiality of the body approximates the political conception of dance movements examined according to their relationships to labour, as mapped out by dance theoretician Bojana Kunst:

[D]ance with its materiality can resist the abstract notion of labor and reveal the problematic relationship between the abstract new modes of labor and the bodies themselves. New modes of labor have tremendous power over the body, especially because they are increasingly erasing every representable and imaginable generality of the body. The dancing body is no longer resisting the dull conditions of work in search of a new society outside work, but it does have the power to disclose how the materiality of bodies distributed in the time and space can change the way we live and work together. It can use this politically and aesthetically transgressive line between work and non-work to open up chances for a future society.<sup>10</sup>

The performance-based works imagined by Ibgby & Lemmens thus offer a means of thwarting the logic of productivity by engaging the body in an action that emphasizes integration of its material and intellectual dimensions.

## **Artistic Labour as a Cognitive Laboratory**

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens turn artistic labour into a sort of cognitive laboratory, creating hybrid, paradoxical forms in an analytical, humorous spirit. On the one hand, they show that there is a diversity of experiences extending beyond quantitative models and that, conversely, those models reproduce patterns of thought that affect human life. On the other, they locate resistance to the injunction to produce in the materiality of the body, and preserve, through improvised action, the spaces of indetermination necessary for its implementation within artistic activity.

This exhibition also posits the connections between the completion of an action, the unfolding of a form, and the materialization of an idea in the exhibition space as so many essential coordinates in the artists' practice. From one work to the next, forms, trajectories and concepts "happen"; they respond to each other. The curve of a three-dimensional graph used to model the optimum movement of a worker echoes the gesture of the character in *Visions of a Sleepless World* manipulating a sheet of paper to make it look like 3D modeling. The sound of the metronome marking time for a choreographer in *Is there anything left to be done at all?* finds formal resonance in the series of aligned points seen in some of the *Diagrams Concerning the Representation of Human Time*, while also accompanying the passage of time made visible by *Visions of a Sleepless World*.

Sensitivity to this thought in motion and, conversely, to these movements deployed as thought in pictorial or architectural spaces is perhaps what it takes to develop the type of attention necessary to locate resistance to productivity in the body. The key then becomes to mobilize that attention so that our movements in the time and space of this exhibition take shape as new trajectories of thought.

*Translated by Michael Gilson*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Christina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli, *Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value*, trans. Emanuele Leonardi, *Ephemera, Theory and Politics in Organization* 10 (3/4), 2010: 234-252. While it does not directly reference this work, the title of the exhibition takes up a central concept of the definition of cognitive capitalism, whereby neoliberalist ideology exerts control over our lives, deriving profit from them beyond the mere sphere of labour.

<sup>2</sup> The cognitive capitalism model is characterized among other things by the shifting of the objectives of labour from production of merchandise to production of “immaterial” knowledge, via a new organization of labour based on use of information technology and communications, and via blurring of the distinction between “work-time” and “life-time”. See, among others, Fumagalli, *Life Put to Work*; Christian Azaïs, Antonella Corsani and Patrick Dieuaide, eds., *Vers un capitalisme cognitif* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001); *Multitudes – Capitalisme cognitif*, 1/2008 (No 32).

<sup>3</sup> *Diagrams Concerning the Representation of Human Time – Now and Absence of Time*, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here of *Visions of a Sleepless World*, but also of the project *The Golden USB*, and its proposition that every thing existing on Planet Earth can be listed in an immense sales catalogue, making each of them available on a hypothetical market located in outer space.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the history of refusal of work, see Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp and The Refusal of Work*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For the Images Festival 2014.

<sup>7</sup> For example, choreographer Justine A. Chambers decides to interrupt an action and begin another when she notices that she has ceased paying sufficient attention to it. On the results of this experimentation, see “Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens in conversation with Kate MacKay,” Toronto, Images Festival, April 16, 2014 [Online] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS8S6bO6cTY>; Alison Cooley, “Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens on Non-Doing in Art,” *Canadian Art*, May 14, 2014 [Online] <http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2014/05/14/richard-ibghy-marilou-lemmens/>.



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<sup>8</sup> This idea of the artist's learning as the end goal of their professional activity is in line with the idea of a knowledge-based economy. In this regard, it should be recalled that forms of work established in the artworld are today difficult to differentiate from other structural models of professional activity in the post-industrial world; this is the reason why lbghy & Lemmens make their own art practice the subject of their experiments.

<sup>9</sup> This work by lbghy & Lemmens posits a curious reversal of the use of drugs. Where for Michaux they represented the potential to free the mind from its subordination to rationality, the scenario devised by the artists considers drugs a tool for maximizing performance. Drugs are therefore instead interpreted as a means of subjection to neoliberal ideology, on the pretext of liberating the body from the biological imperative of sleep.

<sup>10</sup> Bojana Kunst, "Dance and Work. The Aesthetic and Political Potential of Dance," in *Emerging Bodies. The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography*, ed. Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2011), 58.