

WHAT WORK IS

Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens challenge our drive to be productive

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*Well while I'm here I'll
do the work—
and what's the Work?
To ease the pain of living.
Everything else, drunken
dumbshow.*

These concluding lines from Allen Ginsberg's "Memory Gardens" (1969) express one of the core questions of Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens' *Putting Life to Work*. "What's the work?" More precisely, who decides what counts as work and how it is counted?

The occasion for "Memory Gardens" is death, as the poem is an elegy for Ginsberg's friend Jack Kerouac; by contrast, Ibgby and Lemmens' sculptures and video installations explore the birth of new and insidious ways of controlling the work process. The artists are "interested in the transformation from an economy based on industrial modes of production to economies based on post-industrial modes of production,"⁽¹⁾ and exploring how the ways we work and

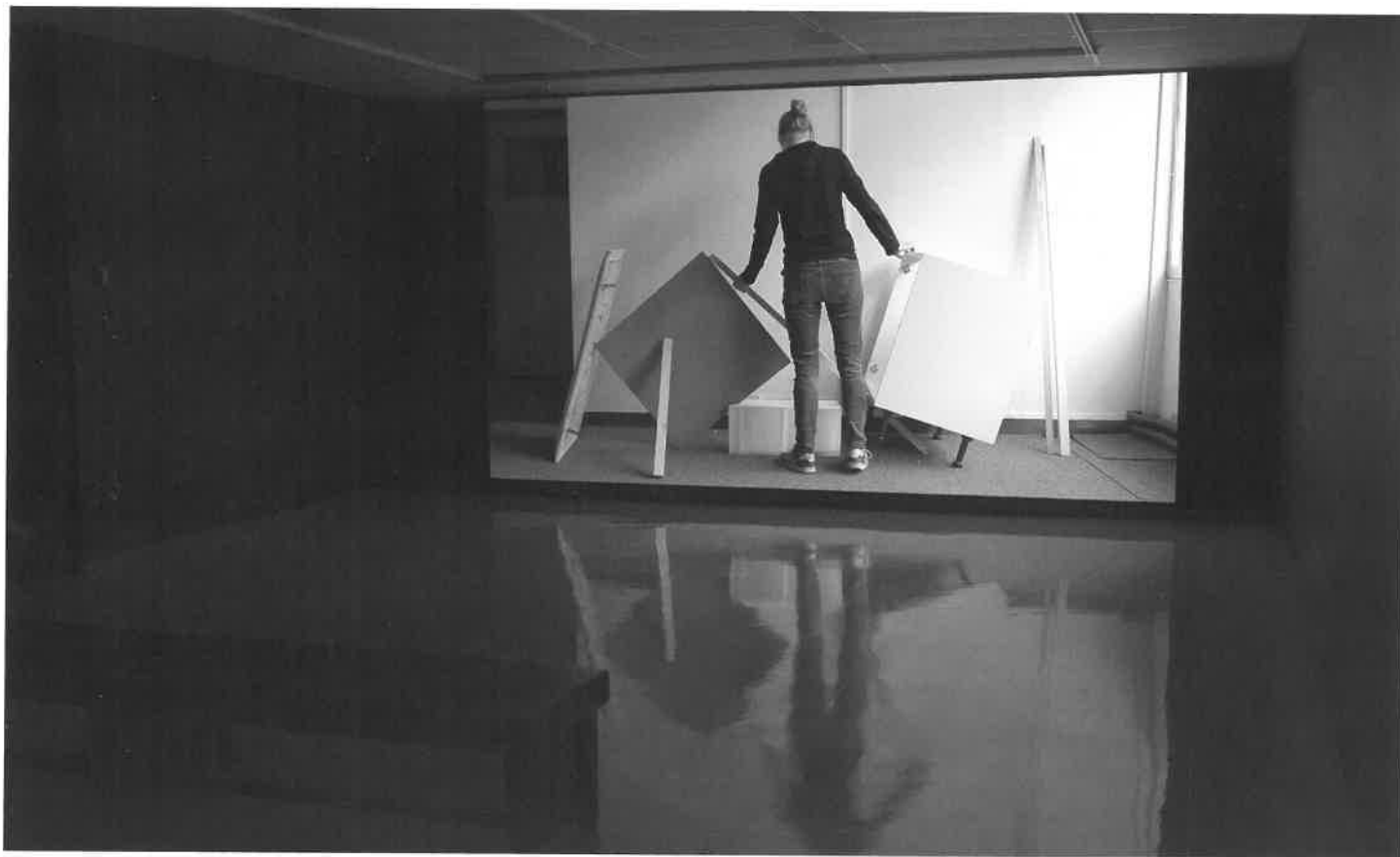
organize our labour have changed alongside those transformations.

The most remarkable engagement with what work is in light of this large-scale shift comes across on a small scale. In *Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation* (2016), Ibgby and Lemmens convert graphs that measure and manage labour into miniature sculptures made with wood, acetate and thread.

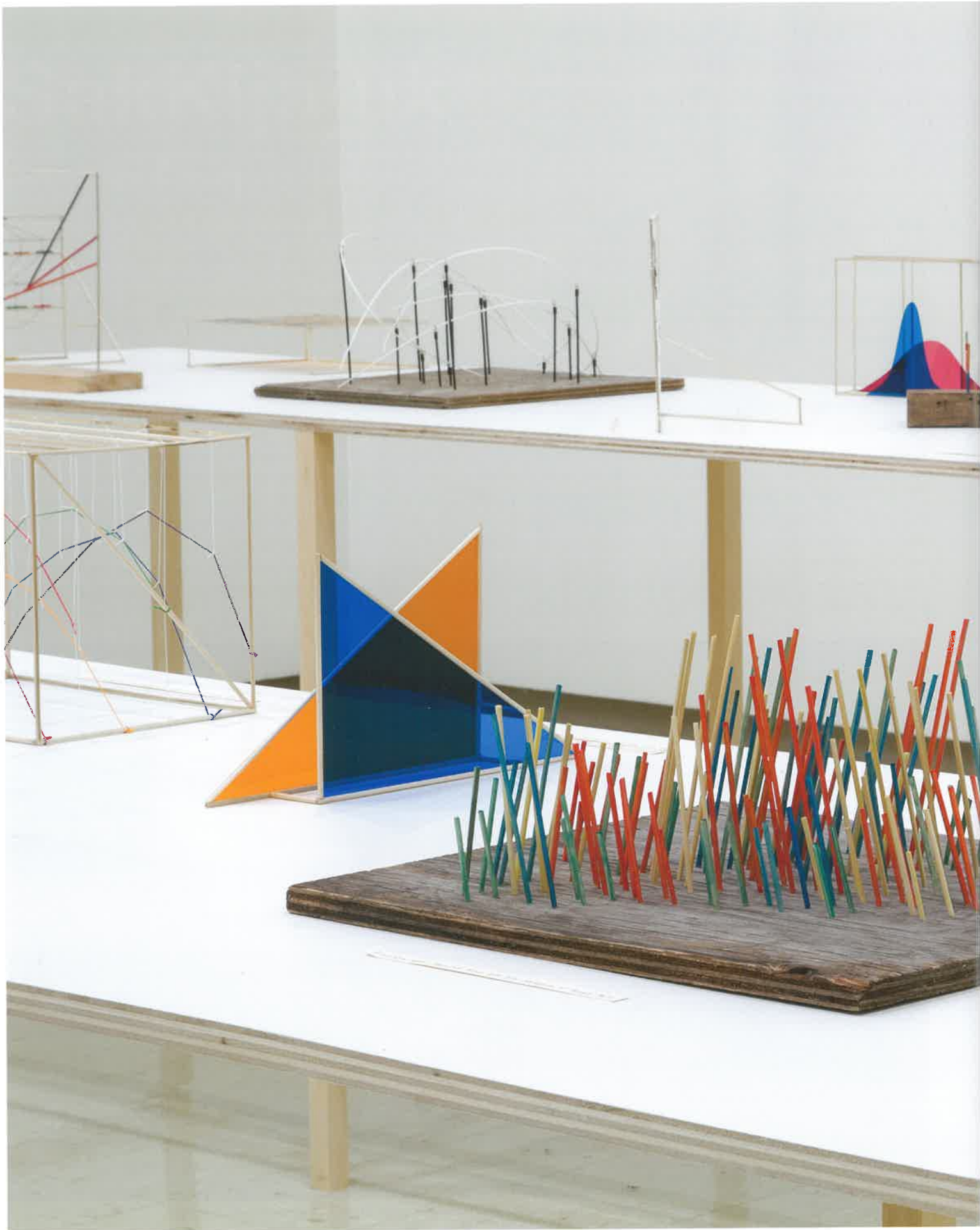
The brightly-coloured sculptures are splayed across 15-foot-long tables at both the Owens Gallery and Galerie d'Art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen, which are co-presenting the exhibition. At first glance, it appears to be the belongings of a daycare—like a collection of mobiles, labyrinths, abacuses and bead rollercoasters.

The title of each sculpture communicates something more serious: "Cotton Production and Slave and Cotton Prices," "Median CEO Pay by Type of Compensation," "Employee Response to New Work Environment." Each is printed in pen on 1-by-4 inch placards at the base of the sculpture, providing a graphic trace of human presence.

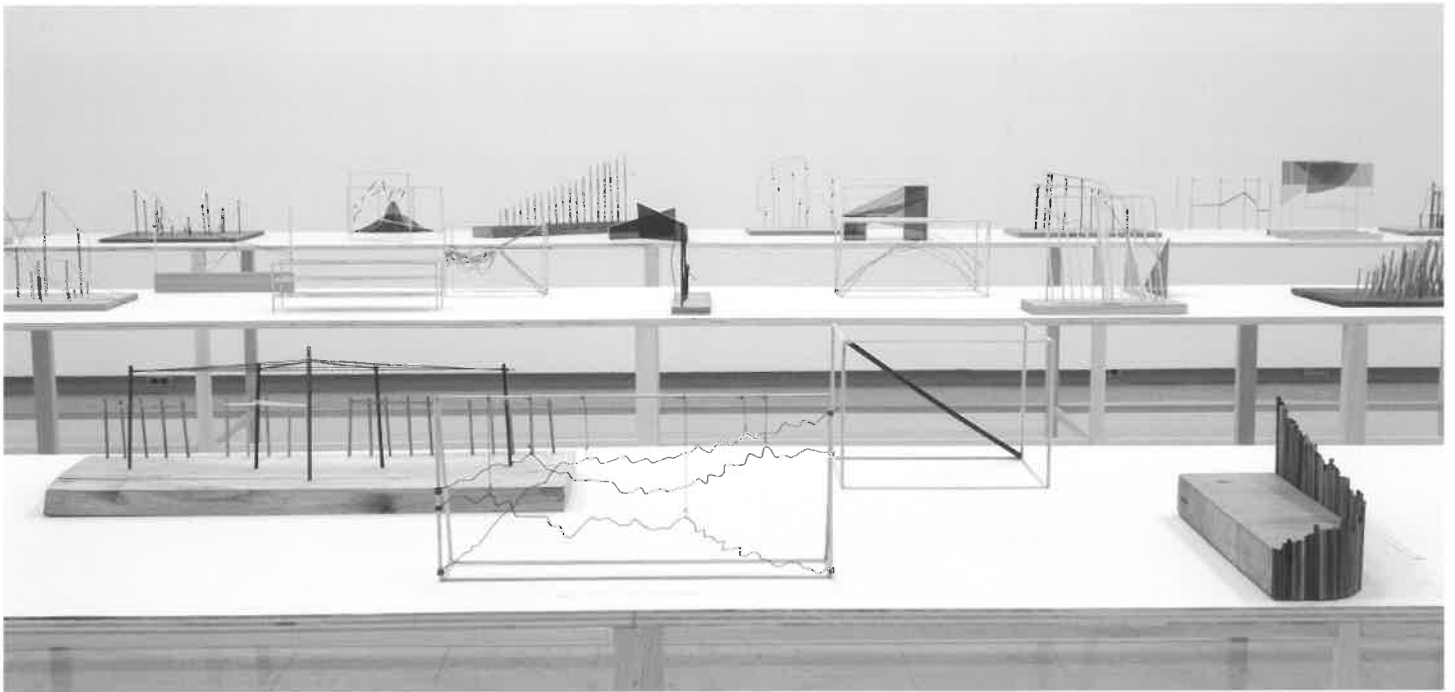
When the viewer encounters "Method of Bricklayer Laying Bricks by the Old Method" next to "Vitra Citizen Office Diagram," Ibgby and Lemmens' choice of graphs seems accidental. Such juxtapositions, though, resist the instrumental logic of economic management and illustrate the rapacious scope of its designs on the working class. The exhibition's fragments of capital's scientific plotting of every aspect of our lives stretch back to Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose turn-of-the-century time-motion studies aimed at increasing worker efficiency, i.e., stealing as much as possible from labour.



Installation detail of Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens' *Putting Life to Work*, Owens Art Gallery, 20 January - 12 March 2017. Photo: Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens







Images pg. 34-36: Installation views of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens' *Putting Life to Work*, Owens Art Gallery, 20 January - 12 March 2017. Photos: Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens

"Our lives may be one long enterprise and you try to maximize the output," Ibghy said of the sculptures in a 2016 *Canadian Art* interview.⁽²⁾ "But real life is messier. It cannot be simplified for maximum efficiency."

There is only one evaluative title in the collection of 73 sculptures. In "Job Insecurity Isn't Always Efficient," the wire desperately grasps at the dowel columns like arms flailing on a sinking ship.

The intricately constructed sculptures show an important difference at the level of intention. Whereas the original architects of the graphs aimed to conceal management's complete control in abstract terms, Ibghy and Lemmens suggestively materialize abstraction, revealing its concrete force.

This materialization of abstraction and the lived consequences of capital's insatiable demands for increased productivity are complemented by the three video installations included in the exhibition: *Real failure needs no excuse* (2012), *Is there anything left to be done at all?* (2014/2016), and *Visions of a Sleepless World* (2014-2015). All three videos dramatize non-productive labour.

"Basically, we were curious as to what would happen if we could suspend that pressure to be productive, which, to a large extent, is internal," Ibghy said of *Is there anything left to be done at all?*⁽³⁾ "The pressure might originate from the exterior, but we, as labourers, have internalized it to the point where we want to work hard, we want to read this book or that essay because we want to produce better work."

Real failure needs no excuse (2012) is the most absorbing of the three "suspensions." A single-channel video depicts Lemmens busying herself with purposeless tasks in an abandoned office.

There are faint hints of a narrative. At one point she hums while arranging a floor fan beside a desk, as if she is a new employee setting up her office. This action quickly cedes to shots of her stacking discarded inventory, such as cubicle dividers and

cardboard, in various office interiors. Chairs freeze in leap-frog formation, then slide off. She dances, draped in black fabric. There is the steady hum of traffic outside the window. Occupying a space designed to embody our ethos of efficiency and divorcing their activity from any end goals, the artists turn the notion of work into an absurd, abstract concept.

Ibghy and Lemmens draw on the influential, but problematic, ideas of post-Marxist thinkers such as Antonio Negri and Maurizio Lazzarato. Lazzarato views "the refusal of work"—to borrow from the title of one his books, cited in Véronique Leblanc's exhibition essay—as holding radical political potential. For intellectual and aesthetic labourers, such subtraction has an undeniable appeal; however, as advanced capitalistically developed countries displace, hide, or downplay their ongoing dependence on industrial and agricultural labour, it is worth wondering just how commensurate theories of so-called "immaterial labour" are with capital's ambitions.

But even though the "the transformation from an economy based on industrial modes of production to economies based on post-industrial modes of production" that Lemmens identifies above is more imaginary than real, the pair powerfully brings to life our changing experiences of work's false imperatives. ■

Sources:

- 1) Alison Cooley, "Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens on Non-Doing in Art," *Canadian Art*, May 14, 2014, canadianart.ca/features/richard-ibghy-marilou-lemmens.
- 2) Bryne McLaughlin, "Richard Ibghy and Marliou Lemmens and the Art of Underperforming," *Canadian Art*, August 18, 2016, canadianart.ca/features/richard-ibghy-marliou-lemmens-underperforming.
- 3) Cooley, 2014.

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