

GB11 Curatorial QA – The Labor Point of View

Curatorial conversation with Binna Choi, Ane Hjort Guttu, Mika Tajima, Cooperativa Cráter Invertido, Adelita Husni-Bey, Joungmin Yi, Sojung Jun, Christian Nyampeta, Dora García, Jeamin Cha, Bona Park, Flo Kasearu, Andrew Norman Wilson, and Tyler Coburn.

The subject of work is one of the key concerns of GB11, under the umbrella or strand of “the labor point of view.” The subject of work is also somewhat tiring, while it has been one of the central issues for politics and the labor movement for now over a century. Life free from labor is what revolutionaries have been dreaming of. So have the Korean youth: the top agenda for the future of Korea, they say, is a different kind of culture where the balance between work and life is improved, and rest and quality of living are more valued. So-called “accelerationists” also dream of this, believing that total automation by technology would make it possible. Yet, instead, labor has only been relocated further and further to the invisible realms, such as areas where no media reaches or homes.

Meanwhile, the classical categories around labor such as working class or proletariat are being dismantled, and intellects and creativity are becoming interests of capital. The well-known distinction by Hannah Arendt between labor, work, and action may not stand as it used to, as those who take a critical stance are subjected to the same conditions of work they’re inquiring into, such as exhaustion and precarity. So, the subject of work is still somewhat tiring. Artists are excellent examples in the current capitalist economy of immaterial and flexible labor, creative economy and social capital, and they are not exempt from the general condition of labor as numerous projects and books have been explaining for the last twenty years. One of the earlier works that points at this is the project *Atelier Europa* (2004) at Kunstverein München initiated by artist Marion von Osten. *I Can’t Work Like This* (2007) by GB11 artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian, a sentence made of nails, also much resonates. I myself co-developed a project dealing with different modes of labor-organizing inside and outside of the field of art, titling it after Haghghian’s work, at Casco, Utrecht, in 2012. Around the same time appeared the book *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art* (2011), edited and published by GB11 fellows e-flux and including a widely read essay by another GB11 artist, Hito Steyerl.

General antagonism versus the general condition? How are artists resisting the current work regime? Is art-work a kind of work? Or is it non-work, in the most obvious sense that it’s exempt from wage-relation?¹ Does artistic labor prefigure as well as transfer its exceptional quality of

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However, there has been the insurgence of various collective efforts and campaigns to demand fees for artists, such as W.A.G.E in New York, Platform BK in the Netherlands, and Art Workers Gathering (미술생산자모임) in Korea. I myself also have been involved in this through various collective projects at Casco such as ASK! (Actie Schone Kunst) as part of the *Grand Domestic Revolution* (2011–12), which took a co-relation between domestic labor and artistic labor as a fertile ground for social change, or Site for Unlearning: Art Organization (2014–15) where together with artist Annette Krauss the whole team of Casco engaged with different modes of organizational work far from the sense of “busyness.” Above all, in this edition of the Gwangju Biennale an artist

living and doing to its viewers? Does artistic labor generate an alternative to the general labor condition, even though it over-identifies or appropriates the conventions of labor?

When McKenzie Wark, from whom we borrow the expression “the labor point of view” for the current strand, speaks of labor, the focus lies in the possibilities of collective agency: the possibility of changing working and living conditions by organizing ourselves, with our plurality intact yet as one force, or in his words, by “working people of all kinds.”² He seems to argue that the force for this possibility is ideology as “a means of threading people together around their tasks.” My suggestion is that this ideology might well be interchanged with imagination or imaginative labor, especially at every moment or every place where this labor is oppressed. And needless to say, this imagination is always collective – you don’t own imagination. This way we, with all the joy loaded in affirmative power, make labor a central place for social change. Artistic imaginative labor, then, might work as an alternative fuel to keep imagination alive.

As a possible way to practice this labor point of view, especially in the circumstance of making an international biennale – a non-stop process of production and coordination across great distances among more than 200 agents, including artists, curators, coordinators, producers, administrators, communicators, designers, and art and non-art organizations, I’ve chosen a survey as a method. I sent three questions to a selected group of GB11 artists whose practice in general – not just their work in the Biennale – deals with the issue of labor, and created a common document in Google Drive. This was done with the anticipation that an energy would be generated from multiple voices and positions and a form of contact or dialogue might emerge, all somewhat “effortlessly,” which was an important point in doing this. To fulfill this anticipation, we needed about two weeks for the artists to share their responses. I made some comments or sent reminders a couple of times to enliven the space of the shared document. When finally all the responses were made, I edited each separate response by each artist so that they appear like a collective-report-cum-roundtable, in consideration of activating the readership as “the labor point of view.” The result is the following. At the same time it turns out to be a manifestation of what art does – and does not – over the issue of labor.

The questions were:

What (other) kind of labor (and life, and world!) you imagine through your artistic practice, and if possible the work you are presenting for GB11?

What does your work (as an artist) do in order to materialize or actualize such labor? More specifically, if it’s about organizing labor, what does your work suggest or enable for organizing either, in terms of technique, or relation?

How are these questions reflected in your own working condition?

Binna Choi

fee is applied in the first time in its history, at the curators’ request. Each artist or group is paid US\$500 for the contribution of an existing work and US\$2,000 for a new work.

How much time are you really working each day against your own will?

A report from the labor point of view

1. Diagnose and Problematize

Ane Hjort Guttu: East Asian business and creative industry employees are among the hardest-working people in the world, as exemplified by the story around a blog by Indonesian copywriter Mita Diran, who died of exhaustion after overwork. What's problematic is that no one holds Diran's company responsible. The conclusion boiled down to the following: "Don't work too hard, take a break and enjoy life." This portrays an industry where all control has evaporated into self-control, and all responsibility is distributed onto the single individual employee.

Mika Tajima: There is always an expectation of performance – to act and work in a certain way in a specific space. My collaborations with speakers, dancers, designers, factory workers, musicians, filmmakers, philosophers, weavers, and translators, among others, stem from an early focus on how our built environment (however abstract) reflects the ideological demands on the performing subject, to maximize oneself and output.

Cooperativa Cráter Invertido: Work and labor, as reproduced in neoliberal capitalism, not only produce our sicknesses but apparently pretend to be their cure, with pharmaceuticals and media spectacles some of the biggest beneficiaries of this generalized consumerist sickness condition. Technological revolution supposedly had a key for the liberation of humans through the efficiency of machines, whereas today roles are perversely inverted, and it appears that humanity is using all its living effort to produce and sustain the world-as-a-war-machine even if it means the destruction of Earth. Work produces illness, but not all malfunctions are recognized as such. For example, the sickness of success is highly valued as a cure against a very common condition known as poverty. Mostly work is a problematic that has to deal with time and its production.

Adelita Husni-Bey: Having the strength (or naiveté, or privilege) to think of more equitable forms of labor (life and world!) is a curse visited upon us, the petite bourgeoisie birthright/unwanted inheritance of the flexi/mini-wage, perpetually travelling art-precariat. The near recognized legitimated Artist with a capital or near capital A, and the Curator with a capital or near capital C, with our happy self-exploitation for fame and/or a greater cause (these terms cannot be friends).

CCI: As artists, work is a sickness also if it means the productionization of leisure time.

Joungmin Yi: Generally labor in art doesn't guarantee artists' lives and sustainability. And also hierarchy of labor has very often arisen in the art field, regardless of its claims. Unexpectedly the practical solutions of conflict belong to discursive consciousness, empathy, generosity, or attitude rather than structural improvement. Sometimes my labor of painting gives me simple gratification in the sense that I depend on my technique. But the exhibition is a different state. For example, recently my solo show included a spontaneous question: How much physical and

non-physical effort of ever so many “others” does it take to make a “solo” exhibition happen? To what extent, then, is a solo exhibition truly solo?

Sojung Jun: I pay close attention to the “daily experts” I encounter in my daily life. Thoughts about how the concept of art has been detached from the values of life and labor, efficiency, or pragmatism in our daily life come to me. I dream of a harmony and a balance between life and art, but looking at how the dream continues to be broken down and split, I have to continuously ask how art is linked to experiences in life.

Christian Nyampeta: The dichotomy between the matter and the spirit is then at the source of the opposition of rest and work. Hence the categorical disjunction between rest and work, and the thought that the relation of these two activities is that of exclusion: we either work or rest. However, this exclusion profiles the inaccuracy of the dichotomy of rest and work in my praxis. Rather, in my case, it is the specialization, that is, the separation of the productive fields of life and work, and their major dichotomy between mental and manual activities, that amplify the opposition between rest and work. It is only in a relation of domination between the spirit and matter that I need to rest from the spirit or matter, meaning, to let the other side rest after being dominated. In that regard, I might only rest from domination: my body needs to rest after being disciplined and governed by the spirit and vice versa.

What can be the way out of this domination? Can a body posture be considered a thought? And vice versa, can a thought be expressed in a body posture?

Dora García: What does “labor” mean in the case of intellectuals, what is intellectual labor, what does it consist of, and as a direct consequence of this, what is the position of the intellectual in the social and political landscape? This position is a very paradoxical one, permanently plagued by guilt and nausea, as can be read in this wonderful text by Julio Cortázar, “Literature in Revolution and Revolution in Literature: Some Misunderstandings to Clarify.”

2. Propose and Speculate

CCI: How much time are you really working each day against your own will? If you feel the anxiousness in procrastination then how much of your time are you dedicating to pleasure, study, struggle, organization? The clock is ticking yet it has also been stopped! We want time not to be a merchandisable object, rather an objective for the unexpected-therefore unvalued to happen. It also has to do with how we measure time to make it a certain commodity to consume, with its scales and proportions, understanding time as a thing is crucial to start using it properly for our common benefit: winning time against capital can't be just an individual goal.

JY: Without relinquishing the concept of a solo exhibition, the solo exhibition of mine entitled *Spectre-Technique* (2015) is intricately woven from threads of engagements of others who have made this event possible. The participants and collaborators I invited in the exhibition performed some roles for my exhibition and made their own work to show under the same subject at the

same time. It's like a shared house. I'm not sure if it works in reality. But one thing obvious is labor beyond alienation of labor takes much time to negotiate, and to keep thinking and sharing with others, so it demands not to be afraid of distraction and distance.

SJ: My work composed of seven short videos entitled *The Habit of Art* (2012) shows acts that can only be derived from undergoing long-term iterative training and practice, or a process of experiencing the passage of time itself, starting from daily habitual acts – endlessly accumulating matchsticks by working on a balance, scooping up the moon reflected on the water with my hands, pouring water continually into a broken jar. There are other acts too: freely rolling a glass pebble on one's hand as if by magic, jumping over a ring of searing flame, and walking on a balance beam while holding water-filled cups. As acts like tedious labor are repeated, derived from daily habitual acts, I could experience moments through my body in which art becomes labor or labor turns into art, as initial plans of mine undergo ups or downs. Magic-like art to save our lives, for me, turned out to be a trick of one's eyes. Artworks seemingly deserving perpetuity exuded different meanings in different times. Artists' commitment and devotion to art looked imprudent and absurd, and art seemed powerless in the world. I sometimes experienced moments in which everything turned opposite all of a sudden in a simple, yet short and strong repetitive loop. I kept records of such gaps by endlessly perceiving them in a series of video works.

Jeamin Cha: I envision my labor functioning on two tracks. One, through my actualized labor – such as working with the Hope Solidarity Labor Union () reporting the dangerous working conditions of the temporary cable workers, in order to distribute the report among other union workers to help create solidarity among the temporary cable workers. I eventually sent the report to the National Assembly as a call for new laws that would better protect temporary cable workers in the wake of the Asian financial crisis in the late '90s. Another, through labor that proliferates through time – by making an art piece like *Chroma-key and Labyrinth* (2013) that incorporates one of the workers whom I interviewed in the report as an actor. During the interview, the worker said that he had dreamed of being an actor when he was young. The film, in part, was meant to be a catalyst to fulfill a worker's long forgotten dream.

The actualized labor of documenting and reporting had a tangible political plan that could be realized in a determinable period of time. However, I envisioned the video piece, the imaginative labor, to live on and enact a different kind of change, one that breaches the subconscious through a longer time period as it exists through future sociopolitical climates and landscapes.

AHG: Our (me and Daisuke Kosugi's) film work *The Lost Dreams of Naoki Hayakawa* (2016) is about a person who literally loses his capability of dreaming, due to a kind of neo-totalitarian exploitation. The film portrays an art director in an advertisement agency in Tokyo. It suggests dreams as an escape strategy from exploitation – Naoki Hayakawa starts dreaming strange and wonderful dreams as a way of handling his extreme sleep deprivation – and the exploitation of dreams as a kind of final end point.

CN: The question of the difference between work and rest could become that of modulation, of alternation, of a rhythm, rather than the mutual exclusion of work and rest. Such rhythm would require an attentiveness to micro-rhythms, in my case, idio(rhythms). Idiorrhythmy is then understood here as this modulation which complicates the dichotomy of work and rest. Here I am thinking of philosopher Isaïe Nzeyimana.

My focus on “rest” follows an idea I had in which “that which adds to life” and “that which takes away from life” replace the categories of good and bad. For me, the measure of this addition-to-life is the quality of and the ability to generate and to give rest. Here, rest is considered not so much as leisure or inaction but as an action of being sensitive to what is to come. In its faculty of a reserve, rest is a work of genesis, it is that which gives life. While its quality of a resource may be in or out of reach, rest is that which resides outside of conceptualization. It involves work and labor and yet rest is that which is left or stays proper to its own being but also connects this being to the world to come.

MT: If much of life today is a readymade, can we contribute to its unmaking? My series of mood-light sculptures titled *Meridian* (2016) begins with disassembling a Setu Chair, which is a highly designed task chair. The core of its form is a kinematic spine, which looks like a human skeleton, but also seeks to shape and control it. The sculpture presents a new configuration of these chair components, in a way retasking the chair to become an image of deactivation in its new use. A translucent skin made of thermoformed plastic and cocoon resin wraps around these skeletal armatures, allowing the changing internal light to illuminate its bodily form. The sculptures use a custom sentiment analysis program that scrapes live Twitter feeds from distant cities and analyzes the input as quantified moods. The light color and intensity change in response to this processed data, creating a technological emotional display. This technology feeds on the transit of human feeling to language, to numerical value, to visible light, underlining how productive life energies are gathered and transformed. *Meridian* could be seen as a contemplation object about non-performance. Perhaps in the encounter with the lamp, one could commune around the light with others, to think about escaping from view, performing against type, or not at all – to be free from the labor which one ought to perform (*argos*).

If the visual apparatus is solar, we seek shadows. Drawn together by what we can see, we commune with what is hidden: “And it is thus that nocturnal moths, when the sun of the universal has set, seek the light of the lamp of the particular,” writes Karl Marx in *The German Ideology* (1846).

DG: Labor in the case of what have been called “intellectuals” is “to think,” “thinking” being an activity extremely difficult to quantify, both in quantity and in quality. The intellectual thinks; and cannot stop thinking. This thinking is not a happy, satisfied, peaceful thinking, but on the contrary is constantly shaken, destabilized by the urge to act, the need to be useful to society. But the only way of being useful to society for an intellectual is to keep on thinking. This is a duty and a need and yet it separates the intellectual from those in the realm of action: the activists, the revolutionaries. Intellectuals make very poor revolutionaries, because they

question too many things. But there is an operation that can restore subversiveness to the act of thinking: refuse to work. The refusal of productive work is the very efficient form intellectuals adopt in order to be subversive, revolutionary, and disturb the system. This contemplative life, which opposes the productive efficiency of neoliberalism, finds in the exercise of memory and the activity of reading its favorite strategies.

Bona Park: I parallel art and labor through my work *1967_2015* (2015), which includes a sound-maker's (Foley artist's) performance representing the coalmine collapse in Korea in 1967. While the sound-maker is doing his job for living, by putting him on the screen instead of behind it, I bring his "labor" into the gallery in order to change it into "work." As a laborer and art performer, he produces several sounds of the process of rescuing a miner who survived the accident. Through his representing/repeating the miner, the relation between art and the real, present and past, and a laborer and a performer become flexible, overlapping each other. I imagined it would lead into conversations about the social and political structure – for example working conditions, the dictatorship, the spectacle, and laborers' right, all related to the accident in 1967 and the performance in 2015 – so their labor results in action, which happens in the public realm according to Hannah Arendt.

Flo Kasearu: My work as an artist is connected clearly with the labor of my life. Raising my child, renovating the house, doing an exhibition is simultaneously my life, my art, and my work, my calling and my profession. In 2013 I established my own Flo Kasearu House Museum that is situated in an over-a-hundred-year-old wooden house I inherited some years ago – it is also the site for the GB11 project *Uprising*. The idea of my museum is established in reflecting my daily life and work as a homeowner, freelance artist, and mother. As a living artist my apartment is turned into a collection of artifacts, the attic acts as an archive of works, the basement is a factory, the hallway and backyard are exhibition grounds. With that I can more than symbolically turn everyday labor into part of my artwork: while I am cleaning my house I am actually the cleaner of the museum, when I am socializing with someone, I am doing the communication for the museum. My house museum is an attempt at self-institutionalization, as Maria Lind has said, and my home and everyday life become thus the center point for my art practice.

In my other works I try to find options to collaborate with the representatives of other lifestyles: firefighters, women in shelters, homeless people, shop owners, mothers, actors, truck drivers etc. Through distorting their everyday (working) routines I try to illuminate the essence of their work and working in general. For example when I ordered some firefighters, an emergency rescue team, to move in slow-motion for *We Are On the Way* (2012) it started to act, besides the sweet absurdity of the sight, as a comment on the government's cuts to the funding of fire departments. And at the same time it's a comment on working as an endless process – as something that never ends, regardless how fast one goes.

If people would buy more into these kind of creative working solutions, I believe work/labor could also be a good illness that we don't need to recover from.

3. Dilemma (or Doubt)

AHG: The protagonist's work resembles our own artistic work in most ways, and the process of making the film has therefore caused some doubt about our own working conditions. Classic questions like: Who are we making this for? Or: Is it all about "employability" (Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's term for project-based motivation, meaning you are always performing with the next project in sight)?

CCI: "Work, work, work, work, work, work
When you all gon'?
Learn, learn, learn, learn, learn."
Rihanna, "Work" (2016)

AHB: Experiencing burnouts, as I currently am, remind me that I care. Maybe that I care too much. Self-care as warfare is telling me to care less, and that by resisting I am putting my nervous system at risk.

Andrew Norman Wilson: By the time of finishing my current new video work, I will have put thousands of dollars and hours into its production. It has been a process of grasping for a fantasy that I see when I'm in a new city, or jogging, or under the influence of techno and molly. I can't describe what the fantasy is, but will know when I arrive at it, or fail to reach it. A small fraction of the sequences I have composed will end up in the final edit – seeking is inefficient. The similarities between my behavior and that of the mosquito, oil pumpjack, and syringe bring a sense of camaraderie, but also fear. Like those objects, I may just be a puppet of economic networks or genetic coding. Still, I work my way through this neural reward system of mine, in pursuit of something fleeting, or perhaps even unattainable. Sheryl Crow would say:

"I belong, a long way from here
I put on a poncho and played for mosquitoes
And drank 'til I was thirsty again
We went searching, through thrift store jungles
Found Geronimo's rifle, Marilyn's shampoo
And Benny Goodman's corset and pen
Well, okay, I made this up
I promise you I'd never give up
If it makes you happy
It can't be that bad
If it makes you happy
Then why the hell are you so sad?"
Sheryl Crow, "If It Makes You Happy" (1996)

4. Other Kinds of Suggestion – Arriving Futures

AHB: My work 2265 (2015) was put together by myself and a team of teen spoken-word poets, Authoring Action, who usually meet afterschool or work to write pieces with their mentor, Nathan Ross Freeman. It envisions a future of smoke bombs, threatening AI commercials, people living in craters and pits after the colonization of Mars, twenty-four-hour poverty tourism, surveillance as a reality TV show. Ideas matured through a workshop structured by myself and Nathan that looked at the semantic differences between words such as uninhabited vs. empty, or development vs. imperialism. In a passage from the workshop, he shouts at the teens, rather aggressively: “So what do we have to do in order to save the world?! What’s being asked of you is to do something with humanity with itself! Because since the inception of humanity, we’ve been on this thing (Earth – flutters hands in a circular motion) where we only deal with ... you know, we just keep ... devouring!”

ANW: *Ode to Seekers* (2012) is a loop video that celebrates the existence and activity of three things – a mosquito, an oil pumpjack, and a syringe – as they seek out an ambiguous resource by piercing a surface that looks like desert salt flats, or skin under a microscope, or potato casserole. These high-resolution computer-generated objects thrust and pump in a kind of positive magic-hour lighting that humans are shown in every day on millions of screens around the world. I understand this is a counterintuitive treatment for three of the most destructive entities on earth, but I expect that I will have to live with them for as long as I’m alive and this feels like a productive gesture towards coexistence. The images are gradually affected, scrambled, and deformed as the video progresses – sliding through entropy into abstraction and absence, only to reappear again in vibrant detail. *Ode to Seekers* is meant to loop for as long as videos can be plugged in and played.

The structure of *Ode to Seekers* is based on John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), in which his ecstatic description of the urn’s imagery is meant to prohibit the reader from thinking. This effectively turns them into an object tuned to the aesthetics of the textual material, like an aeolian harp to the wind. But the retarding trance of this poetry of action is suddenly disrupted by a poetry of thought receptive to the marble medium of the urn, offering the benefits of its imagery – “she cannot fade” – and its limitations – “never, never canst thou kiss.” The titular art object is treated as eternal, intensifying his sense of mortality. By treating my three computer-generated models as works of art, *Ode to Seekers* questions this eternity of the art object, and the eternity of a human subject that would be able to appreciate such objects.

Tyler Coburn: What are future scenarios for imagining new types of human bodies, and how might these bodies cast relief on conversations about ability and “fitness” in the present day?

My project *Ergonomic Futures* (2016) asks these questions through the lens of speculative evolution. Specifically, this work comes out of interviews with paleoanthropologists, evolutionary biologists, ergonomists, and genetic engineers. Together, we have discussed everything from

genetic drift and founder effect to space colonization and genetic engineering, all of which may contribute marked differences to what we commonly define as “human.”

While *Ergonomic Futures* casts a wide net – in imagining future lives, worlds, and kinds of labor – there are two points to stress:

The first is that this project is speculative, not science-fictional. While science fiction, according to Fredric Jameson, often functions as social allegory, I’m interested in departing from contemporary disciplinary knowledge: specifically, by asking scholars and scientists to step beyond their historical and empirical grounding to think in tandem about what the future might hold. In so doing, *Ergonomic Futures* suggests the speculative to be vital to epistemological labor.

The second concerns the labor of the audience. Practically, this project takes two forms: a website of short stories (ergonomicfutures.com) and a variable, open-ended series of seats. The seats, made in collaboration with New York architects Bureau V, are ergonomically designed for future bodies; however, until those bodies come along, they’ll have functional lives in fine art and natural history museums. In these circumstances, the bodies in question will never be represented nor described, leaving the audience to speculate about them by using the seats – to experience ergonomic norms that no contemporary human can fit. Speculation here extends from the epistemological to become tactile, corporeal labor.