

## “A new job to unwork at”

PARTICIPANT INC

When Maria Gómez Chávez struck out on her own, her only option for getting by was to marry a man—and over the years, she kept getting married again and again to support her family. Wes Larios, her grandson, understands that he has the privilege of being an artist today because of her economic pragmatism. As part of the group exhibition “A new job to unwork at,” Larios’s text-and-photo installation *Acknowledgements*, 2018, paid homage to his grandmother’s largely unseen labor and myriad sacrifices: Her name and the names of her consecutive husbands and their children, along with their birth dates and years of death, were pasted in black vinyl letters throughout Participant Inc, including on an office air duct and at the top of a stairwell.

*Acknowledgements* was sneaky: One had to actively look for it among the more corporeal pieces. But it was also one of the most poignant works in the show—not only for Larios’s moving gesture, but for how it made plain the cunning women must deploy to survive an oppressive and patriarchal system. These were some of the ideas that bounced around this eleven-artist show, curated by Andrew Kachel and Clara López Menéndez. Their project (which also included a summer residency and several public programs) felt conversational, the discursive product of bright minds reading, talking, and finding affinities between various sources and objects, shining a light on that enduring and seemingly insurmountable question; How the fuck can we get out of this? (“This” being, ultimately, capitalism and its attendant brutalities.)

A hefty reader compiled by the curators provided meta-commentary on the fact that the project was conceptualized, in part, as a catalyst for dreaming up ways to sneak out of the “psychosocial . . . domination” of labor and to change “the system” more broadly. The works on view illustrated this in more or less literal ways. In Devin Kenny’s *Untitled (butane tags for Dead Prez)*, 2011, the artist scrawled PIMP THE SYSTEM in ash on a pockmarked square of Cortega tile. The inscription cites hip-hop duo Dead Prez’s early-aughts song “Hell Yeah (Pimp the System),” a narrative of trying to survive outside the bounds of legality when legality refuses you shelter. The piece evokes the prison-culture practice of writing messages with contraband, such as matches and lighters. Kenny’s gesture was simple, but it deftly bound together themes of race, disenfranchisement, and danger.

Some canonical pieces were also on view—sculpture and photographs by labor activist Fred Lonidier, and documentation of performances by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. The inclusion of these artists reminded us that there has been so much art and so many exhibitions about working a job at least partly because the notion of the “day job” in the art field is a particularly strange and secretive one. Working at such a job is a bourgeois pursuit, yes, but most artists’ circumstances are painfully precarious. Those who try to make a living in the arts are frequently exploited and abused, yet many in the art world espouse leftist pro-worker rhetoric. And too little is said about how often young people with art jobs risk their safety by turning to illegal forms of employment in their off-hours to support their professional “careers.” The exhibition as a whole seemed more concerned with care: creating a sense of solidarity and offering modest proposals to make life more livable. But its title was lifted from Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), a deranged text that arouses because it demands total revolutionary violence.

Wes Larios, *Acknowledgements* (detail), 2018, vinyl text. Installation view. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.



Tehching Hsieh’s thirty-minute video *One Year Performance (Out-door Piece)*, 1981–82, captured a moment of derangement. In this documentary piece, we see the artist performing the titular famous work, in which he committed to never entering any kind of interior space for a year. At one point in the video, Hsieh is arrested for getting into a street fight, and officers drag him into a police station. His visceral scream is startling, and echoed in one’s mind—it was the only time the meditative space of the gallery was disrupted. In the face of Hsieh’s howl of refusal—and of our agonizing political reality today—my heart beats faster when I consider *SCUM*’s proposal to go out into the dark with “a six-inch blade” and strike.

—Ania Szremski

# Frieze

## 'A new job to unwork at'

9 Sep 2018 – 14 Oct 2018

PARTICIPANT Inc.

253 E Houston St #1

NY 10002 New York

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Karin Schneider, *Sabotage*, 2017, installation view, CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco. Courtesy: the artist

### Critic's Pick:

Following a series of public programming at Artspace, New Haven, and LACE Project Space in Los Angeles, curators Andrew Kachel and Clara López Menéndez bring their interdisciplinary research platform, 'A new job to unwork at' to PARTICIPANT INC. The artists included here present works that question, disrupt and jam the ideological and normative operations of 'work' as a discursive, social and economic process. Here, the often rigid labours of aesthetic production are pitted against the labours of the everyday: from the practical – bathing, getting to work – to the emotional: in the performance of empathy or against the forces that drive us mad. Strewn around the gallery floor, Dylan Mira's *VOIDS* (all 2015), cuts and voids four cartoonishly large blank checks. Crucially, these checks are also endorsed: 'I DON'T BELIEVE IN FORM BUT I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MY BODY BETTER,' is scrawled across the back of one in the centre of the gallery. Elsewhere, among video pieces, instructional guides and (somewhat unbelievably) pill capsules filled with fescue plant matter from one of Donald Trump's golf courses, Kandis Williams offers us an equally destabilizing iteration of unworking: two compendiums titled *Reader* – one made by Williams the other by the curators – filled with reprints of texts on art and capitalism from Karl Marx to Fred Moten, are accompanied by a sign which, given the literal weight of these texts, reads more like a desperate plea than it does a liberty: 'FREE BOOKS'.

-- Shiv Kotecha

## A new job to unwork at

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*Julia Bryan-Wilson*

*Toil and trouble: a group exhibition explores the complications of labor.*



*A new job to unwork at*, installation view. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.  
Image courtesy Participant Inc.

*A new job to unwork at, Participant Inc, 253 East Houston Street, New  
York City, through October 14, 2018*

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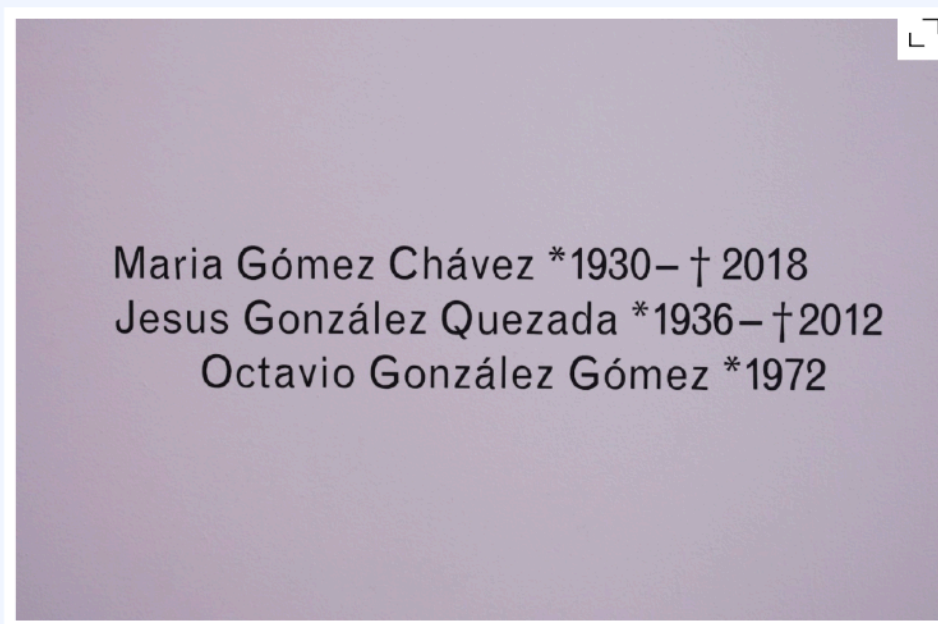
Though perhaps best known for its unique scorched-earth version of feminism, Valerie Solanas's 1967 incendiary and inspiring *SCUM Manifesto* is equally a theoretical tract about labor, calling for the total destruction of "the money-work system." For Solanas—no less than for many feminist Marxist thinkers—the oppression of women is bound up with the economic conditions of capitalism, and the only path for escape out of patriarchy is a radical reenvisioning, indeed a refusal, of the category of work. "SCUM will become members of the unwork force, the fuck-up force," Solanas writes. "SCUM office and factory workers, in addition to fucking up their work, will secretly destroy equipment. SCUM will unwork at a job until fired, then get a new job to unwork at."



*A new job to unwork at*, installation view. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.  
Image courtesy Participant Inc.

Taking its title directly from Solanas, the exhibition *A new job to unwork at* (curated by Andrew Kachel and Clara López Menéndez) brings together eight artists and one collective who grapple with what gender studies scholar Kathi Weeks has termed "postwork imaginaries." The result is laudably ambitious if somewhat aesthetically uneven. A few pieces fall a little flat, such as an oversized voided check by Dylan Mira (2015), but most are poetic and open-ended, including Mira's *7 Skin Night Repair Essence* (2017), an ersatz fountain that is redolent of bodily toil and tactile ministrations. Other artists, such as Wes Larios and Karin Schneider, make thoughtful contributions that render legible

normally occluded familial reproductive labor and networks of informal queer kinship. For his evocative *Acknowledgements* (2018), Larios installed an homage to his grandmother at the margins of the gallery (a spare list of names and dates inscribed in doorways and on the metal air duct near the ceiling). The first member of his family to immigrate to the US, she helped ensure financial stability for the clan through a series of marriages and hence laid the grounds for the conditions of possibility for Larios's artmaking.



Wes Larios, *Acknowledgements*, 2018 (detail). Vinyl text. Photo: Mark Waldhauser. Image courtesy Participant Inc.

One of the most interesting aspects of the show is how pieces from the 1970s and early 1980s are deployed as counterpoints to the more contemporary work—suggesting how persistent, and persistently vexing, this topic is. An example is *Create-A-Clock* (1978), by Fred Lonidier, the San Diego artist and stalwart union activist who has, for several decades, explored issues around occupational safety. His project intervenes in a make-your-own-clock kit to juxtapose the regimentation of remunerated factory time with the ostensible leisure of unpaid family time—though as Solanas and organizing efforts like the 1970s Wages for Housework Campaign both realized, for women the domestic sphere is hardly free play.



*A new job to unwork at*, installation view. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.  
Image courtesy Participant Inc.

On view on low monitors in the middle of the gallery are two major additional historical touchstones: video documentation of Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance (Outdoor Piece)* (1981–82) and Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Sanman Speaks* (1977–85). In Hsieh's thirty-minute compression of his full calendar year living in a sleeping bag and attempting to never enter a building, subway, car, tent, or any other dwelling, we see many moments of the artist's self-imposed deprivations, but also instances of tenderness and generosity on the part of those who help keep him fed. When Hsieh is arrested after an altercation, it is hard to read what motivates his genuine panic about being forced to go inside—is this fear related to his status as an undocumented immigrant, or fear that the integrity of his own strictly bounded endurance performance will be compromised? Hsieh's piece raises productively unresolvable questions about the parallels and disjunctions between the precarities of statelessness, the insecurities of involuntary homelessness, and the desires and commitments that can accompany unwaged artistic practice.

Ukeles offers a model of solidarity between differently valued forms of labor in an hour-long video that presents her conversations with sanitation workers in

New York City about the hostilities they face from the public and about their dilapidated facilities, such as barely functioning locker rooms. The artist shakes their hands and thanks them individually, and many of the sanitation workers also thank her—that this simple gesture of mutual respect is still unusually moving, some thirty years later, indicates that the bar is set tragically low for expectations about cross-class interactions, not to mention those that are cross-gender and cross-race.



*A new job to unwork at*, installation view. Photo: Mark Waldhauser. Image courtesy Participant Inc.

In addition to serving as centerpieces of *A new job to unwork at*, Hsieh and Ukeles were both featured in the influential exhibition *Work Ethic*, curated by Helen Molesworth at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003, and both make appearances in the recently released Whitechapel/MIT Press volume *Work*, edited by Friederike Sigler, an anthology that sports a photograph of Ukeles on its cover (full disclosure: my writing appears in Molesworth's exhibition catalog and in Sigler's volume). There is a reason that these two figures have become vital to so many recent conversations about art and labor: both artists are at once emotionally affecting and complex in their treatment of the way privilege

functions in relation to race, gender, class, and (invented or real) affinity. Or maybe they are so affecting precisely because they are so complicated; in divergent ways, Hsieh and Ukeles demonstrate that confronting the topic of work through the framework of art takes many long, hard hours. Years. A decade. A lifetime.

Indeed, the objects, texts, and videos on view in the narrow gallery space of Participant Inc are only one facet of Kachel and López Menéndez's larger, ongoing project about unworking, one that crucially includes the racialized politics of care and the importance of pleasure. Along with organizing the exhibition, the curators also hosted a research residency, compiled a reader of source material (a different reader on offer was assembled by Kandis Williams of Cassandra Press), sponsored two workshops with Coop Fund (an experimental funding platform for artists), and launched a series of public programs that included a collaborative song-writing performance by Amelia Bande (*Punching Songs Together*), a dialogue between scholar Weeks and Lise Soskolne of W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), and a film screening of two experimental documentaries (JoAnn Elam's *Everyday People*, 1978–1990, and Kevin Jerome Everson's *Company Line*, 2009) selected by independent curator Karl McCool.



*Punching Songs Together*, 2018. Musical performance by Amelia Bande with susan snooze karabush, Neyza Honore, Alice Ashton, and Constantina Zavitsanos.



The global relations generated by the unevenly compensated realm of work, and the inequities it produces, are vast, and—as the variably visually compelling objects in this show illustrate—can be resistant to imaging. In her conversation with Weeks, Soskolne called W.A.G.E.'s ongoing efforts toward a more just wage structure for artists “a demand and a refusal.” She stated that “the demand must contain within it a critique of the problem that is so searing that it renders the demand itself inadequate to the enormity of the problem.” Unworking is one possible route toward that critique, as is Solanas's exhortation that, as a feminist and queer collective, we grab for ourselves “some thrilling living.”

*Julia Bryan-Wilson* is spending the 2018–19 year as the Robert Sterling Clark Visiting Professor at Williams College. Her book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* won the 2018 Robert Motherwell Award, and a Korean translation of her influential *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009) is forthcoming from Youlhwadang Press.

# TEMPORARY

## A New Job To Unwork At at Participant INC

HELENA HAIMES on October 4, 2018 at 4:12 AM



*A new job to unwork at. Installation view. Curated by Andrew Kachel and Clara López Menéndez. Courtesy of PARTICIPANT INC. Photo: Mark Waldhauser*

Back in the mid-2000s, when most of my friends and I were in that strange post-college limbo that results from the dawning realization that knowledge production is incredibly tricky to translate into exchange value, we would while away evenings in the pub bemoaning our lot. Having just spent three or more years pointedly squirting expanding foam in a college studio or pondering Derrida for hours with a benevolent professor, we now found ourselves scrubbing floors in galleries or college toilets, answering to asinine bosses in grey office cubicles or, if we were lucky, running errands and making tea for puffed up directors (for no pay) at one of London's big arts institutions. We had been thrust, blinking and naive, into the world of full-time work.

One particular friend, who now happens to be a very successful playwright but at the time had just left drama school, found himself propelled alarmingly quickly through the ranks of a large

chain bookstore; he went from Saturday staff to manager within a year. His secret? Apparently, everywhere he went – up the store escalators on his way to chat to a colleague, en route to a shelf to replace discarded books, to the stationary room to escape the shop floor mid-shift, to the toilets or the tea room or the roof for a cigarette break – he would ensure he strode “quickly and with purpose, with a determined expression.” He used his freshly-honed acting skills to ‘perform’ his role of the ideal worker, and to such perfection that he cast an impressive and very telling illusion over his credulous superiors. By willfully transforming his workplace into a theatrical space, my friend was unwittingly expressing what curators Clara López Menéndez and Andrew Kachel have termed ‘queer labor.’

The more theoretically-engaged among you can probably immediately identify some of the intellectual roots behind their use of this concept: Judith Butler’s seminal repositioning of queerness in the ‘90s; Kathi Weeks’s more recent, sharply speculative critiques of waged ‘work’ as a constructed (as opposed to an inevitable) social and moral imperative; or Maurizio Lazzarato’s prescient 1996 discussion of the sinister rise of Immaterial Labor – as in, labor that’s informational, intellectual or cultural, and insidiously omnipresent rather than overtly identifiable as such. In an era where collective bargaining rights have been dealt a near-death blow thanks to the US Supreme Court’s Janus vs AFSCME ruling and the line between work and leisure time has become ever blurrier for workers across the post-industrialized world, this notion of ‘queer labor’ opens up a wealth of crucial questions, even as it inevitably offers far fewer concrete answers.

Menéndez and Kachel met while they were studying at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies from 2012 – 2014, and it was there that they started to mine the rich potential in these two overlapping fields of enquiry. At the same time, the graduating curators were also investigating what it might mean to work collectively while avoiding becoming what Kachel describes as “...a collaboration that would be legible by the institution.” While their final projects remained officially separate, the two actively pooled resources such as budgets and collaborators. “While Clara was working on more symposium-intensive, discursive projects (to use that term in a very broad way), I was organising an exhibition,” explains Kachel. “But I think we were also interested in the ways that those formats were porous and could be open to each other....it was really a material way of questioning how we work, not just a theoretical questioning.”

Judith Butler’s groundbreaking contributions to queer theory provided the curators with one of their most fruitful starting points. Just as Butler reframed gender as discursively constructed and performed, Menéndez and Kachel started to wonder whether the same could be said of our identities as workers and the idea of work more broadly, or as they describe it in a joint essay, “...a similarly complicated site of potentiality.”

“At grad school we started to think about queerness and what it could do to labor,” says Menéndez. “Then we started thinking about how queerness helps you gain some agency within traditional gender constructs that are forced on you, and that there are comparable ways you can gain agency within what you do as work and how that inscribes itself on the value system...”

“We were both thinking less about queerness as sexuality than as criticality,” she continues, “...queerness as a way of thinking about constant sets of rules that we abide by, and the critical distance that queerness as a project has brought to gender, but applied to work.”

The project's distinctive title, *A New Job To Unwork At*, was inspired by the *SCUM Manifesto* – Valerie Solanas' 1967 provocative, penetrating attack on patriarchal privilege and the structural inequalities that legitimize it. Solanas doesn't merely call for a rejection of work as a societal given, but demands the formation of an "unwork force – the fuck-up force" that would forcefully hollow out the status quo by secretly destroying factory equipment, giving merchandise away for free and otherwise violently disrupting their occupations, until they're fired and find "...a new job to unwork at." Menéndez and Kachel used this concept as another theoretical springboard for thinking about work as a site of resistance, both behavioral and aesthetic.

In the five years they've been researching *A New Job To Unwork At* – the most recent iteration of which is currently on show at Participant INC in New York City – the two have produced a pertinent, incisive body of knowledge and curatorial activity around this compound term, in all its profuse potentiality. Over the course of the project's journey from its initiation at Bard College to LACE Project Space in Los Angeles, on to Art Space New Haven and now at Participant INC, they've forged rich connections between scholarship, seminar discussions, screenings, performances, artworks and other cultural products that reimagine work as a site of resistance; examine its social, material and economic manifestations; and even fundamentally question work's ideological supremacy.

It's a deliberately expansive, generous remit that manages to tread that oh-so-delicate line between productive openness and unwieldy nebulosity: a quality that clearly appealed to the institutions that invited Menéndez and Kachel to bring *A New Job To Unwork At* to bear in each of their distinctive contexts. Each iteration has both clear connections to, and institution-specific differences from, its predecessor/s – all with a shared backbone that Menéndez described to me as "...a theoretical core that's evolved and sprawled, but hasn't shifted that much."

They describe the project's first iteration at LACE Project Space as an opportunity to articulate and continue their research in a way that wasn't necessarily obliged to conform to a conventional exhibition format. It was a stage that offered them more time than physical space, allowing them to thoroughly delve into their material, as well as establish deep and productive relationships with a consistent group of practitioners over the course of six weeks in early 2016. Their second residency at Art Space in New Haven later that year, with 1000 square feet of white walled space and large, street-facing windows, was far more visible: more of a "show-y show", as Menéndez puts it.

At Participant INC, it feels as if these two approaches have been fortuitously combined. The exhibition in the organization's Houston Street space features artworks that ponder on labour of many stripes: emotional, physical and professional, as well as – crucially – examining the crossovers between them. Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Manifesto for An Exhibition: CARE* is shown along with documentation from her ongoing residency at NYC's Sanitation Department. While *CARE* has stood the test of time as a reflexive expression of Ukeles's own struggles as a mother and working artist, her *Touch Sanitation* piece – which involved her shaking the hand of every sanitation worker in the city in an effort to highlight a far more traditionally masculine, (and remunerative) form of hidden labor – still resonates all too loudly. Dylan Mira's *VOIDS* (2015) consists of several giant, blank checks inscribed with 'VOID' and sprawled around the gallery – delivering a punchy critique of the value system we're forced to operate within, while Tehching Hsieh's *Outdoor Piece* from 1981 – 2 is a derive-esque work

that forces us to reconsider notions of public/private space, as well as brutally aestheticizing one imagining of true 'hard work.' Ideas around contemporary artistic labour are given a firm platform here too: Rafa Esparza's performance, *Tezcatlipoca Memoirs*, for example, promises to combine an expression of the artist's ongoing 'matrix of labor' that he instrumentalizes as a way to build community and expose forgotten histories.

Public events have also featured heavily in the project's NYC outing. In a brilliant meeting of the speculatively theoretical and 'real world' activism, the curators invited a conversation between Kathi Weeks and Lise Soskolne – artist and founder of *Working Artists and the Greater Economy* (W.A.G.E.). Weeks and Soskolne's wide-ranging discussion touched on post-work imaginaries, the potential of universal income as a stepping stone for moving beyond capitalism's powerful grasp, and the legacy of key feminist labor movements such as *Wages for Housework*. They also talked in depth about W.A.G.E.'s new online system, 'WAGENCY', which enables artists to easily calculate the fees they should be receiving for fifteen types of artistic labor at thousands of US non-profits. "WAGENCY" also negotiates rates with institutions on artists' behalf, a much-needed tool that enables artists to claw back some power in the historically uneven transactional relationship between artists and the organizations they show with. Soskolne's contribution especially offered a genuinely exciting model for curatorial activism in the current political climate – giving a sense of what can be achieved when we make the effort to move away from just preaching to the art world's choir and translate artistic resistance into the world at large.

The research that Menéndez and Kachel have undertaken on artistic labor and the primacy of the work ethic has had a marked impact on the way they relate to artists, too. It seems to have made them highly conscious, even unusually considerate, of the diverse requirements and limits of the practitioners they have chosen to work with. It's an approach that they learned from their own exposure to that all-too-common disconnect between theory and action. As Kachel describes: "I think we've both had experiences working with people who claim very rigorous feminist politics, but there's been an extreme disconnect with the ways they actually work and interact with people and the claims made on paper." He continues: "Maybe it seems like a small thing, but it's actually very difficult to make good on those claims in practice."

Our conversation consistently returned to the importance of considering artists' individual needs and ensuring that every contribution is as meaningful for each practitioner as possible, an ethos that they clearly work hard to cultivate. "Every work interaction is a social interaction," explains Menéndez. "We are working with people who have different needs, and we really consciously keep that in the foreground...it's crucial for us that the conditions of production are as much part of the work as any materials. In fact they are a material."

Finally, it's also worth noting that these two curators are, perhaps inevitably but pointedly given the thrust of their research, clearly working extremely hard in order to realize each iteration of this project as fully and as generously as possible. It turns out that rigorously thinking about alternatives to the entrenched capitalist work ethic requires, well, a serious and committed work ethic.

movement research  
critical  
correspondence



*The following text was written by Andrew Kachel and Clara López Menéndez, curators of A new job to unwork at, which is currently in view at PARTICIPANT INC through October 14:*

*We wrote this text as an introduction of sorts to the first iteration of the project in March 2016 at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). We read it during the opening of the project in a way that mirrored how it was written: a back and forth between us, trying to simultaneously address some of the theoretical concepts that prompted this research and the personal resonances it brought forth. The text is composed of fragments of emails (an intrinsic part of contemporary labor routines and especially significant in our practice since we don't live in the same city), quotes from academic articles and books we had been reading on the topic, such as *The Problem with Work*, *The Communist Manifesto*, or *The Undercommons* to name a few, as well as autobiographical bits—almost journal entries—of our personal encounters with the mandates of labor and work ethics.*

*The making and purpose of this text sought to reflect aspects of the methodology we have developed throughout this research, aiming to evince the slippery and personal nature of a collaboration that stems from friendship and the firm belief that doing things together makes for better things, even if at times it's more difficult. We also wanted to share the experiential rooting of this inquiry, and its fundamental desire to explore the material, affective, and performative dimensions of work in an expansive way. We were looking at words that spoke directly and indirectly to the effects of this classification of human activity, but often from just outside the more canonical resources of the field. We have been interested in considering work's potentials as a biopolitical instrument, and that started by testing the theory in our own experiences, trying to remain aware of how it was working in us while working on this.*

*Andrew Kachel and Clara López Menéndez, curators of A new job to unwork at*

Hola

I'm here if you want to gchat

We were supposed to talk last friday and then... life happened

My dearest babe,

I can't love you more. I hope you know.

I also can't wait to see the projects and adventures this year's brings to us

To have met you is such a gift. Missing you from weird Madrid.

Feliz año Nuevo and huge Besos and hugs

*Political projects that investigate possible emancipatory politics and question traditional notions*

*of*

*activity*

*sexuality*

*family-configuration*

*life expectations*

*and their dependence upon tradition and state definition*

The intersection of moodboard (both "real" and "fake") - notes to self - remuneration transaction (or the material traces and supports thereof) - job for money - "your work"... is a really rich terrain. I love the idea of using backs of checks as notepads. It feels vaguely subversive-- the invalid use of the form, the sheer excess produced by inscribing anything other than your name. Also I love Cookie and Cookie. *WHAT* would they talk about if they found themselves in such proximity in the flesh??

I totally forgot that I was planning to have breakfast

We are interested in thinking about **work**. What is work? How do we do it? What do we include and exclude within its boundaries? Work can be so many things and so hard to pin down at the same time. In trying to formulate some answers to these deceptively complicated questions, we quickly come to face structural issues like the conditions of artistic production in Los Angeles, the particular histories of labor in this context, and production of surplus value for capital owners. Of course, individual experiences with these issues vary widely, and involve diverse strategies of support, getting by, getting ahead, working the system, selling out, dropping out, etc. Then there are the moments when one can't quite be sure of the line between productive and reproductive labor. And maybe now we have a job that we know is work *in a strict sense*, but we have a sense that we haven't *worked our asses off* more than when we were in school. But that doesn't count as work... or does it? Work organizes our lives, pays our rent, drives us insane, and gives us many pleasures. As art workers, sometimes we feel our work can be so pliable and expansive, and other times it's just absolutely inaccessible. Who can afford not to work? We don't want to rashly suggest that WORK = DEATH, but sometimes we wish we could reject it altogether. Or perhaps that would drive us mad.

*Hey*

*I don't know why I didn't read that part of the message.*

Hi,

*Just noticed that there may be a typo*

**i remember the first time someone, actually [NAME] told me while running around, or lying around, or some -ing around in [CITY NAME] that if it were their decision they would abolish work altogether. I remember I was baffled by that statement, slightly embarrassed because they were also struggling with money and supporting themselves (Obviously). Also not doing so bad.**

***Work is a social and economic construct that determines the range of our possibilities, the material reality of our present—time availability, spatial mobility, range of socialization and material rituals; from what we eat to how we dispose of our leisure time—as well as our future survivability chances—retirement, pension or lack thereof.***



A new job to unwork at. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.  
Courtesy PARTICIPANT INC

I'm in [VERY EXPENSIVE CITY] at the moment though I'm renting a wee cabin in [SOME REMOTE PLACE]—you know, just a few miles beyond [LESS REMOTE PLACE]. Trying to figure out when I'm going back because I have the wee domicile until December 1st but I'm in a weird limbo state and don't know what the hell I'm doing. But I'd love to do this project with you.

**That's the good thing about [SAME CITY NAME], we were sort of poor but we could get by. The amount of time we had to exchange for money wasn't as much as in other places. It was a pretty good ratio in fact. Very different than here (general place).**

Now, my life is kind of chaotic at the moment so can I ask you to fire off a brief text to me when you email?[phone number]. I hope this will be temporary—the need to text "read your damn email"—but I have a hideous email/social media phobia wherein I literally won't look at them for 3 months; this has cost me countless problems like publication offers, job offers, missed performances (hitherto unheard of in my entire adult life since I began reading & performing) and missing the death of my best friend's mother. As I say I think this need to text me is gradually coming to an end because I'm actually in THERAPY for the malady which is as bad as some people's fear of flying, don't ask me why.

**When [NAME] said they didn't want to work EVER if they could choose to do so I thought they were**



**a spoiled brat  
a bit of a dreamer  
a bunch of a slacker  
just generally irresponsible**

**All the mechanisms of self-policing at work. I couldn't conceive a life without WORK.**

Anyway, meanwhile, I'm getting caught up on email and will star this and mark it as unread. So creepy to say yes to things (like something I was supposed to do with Bradford this summer) then forget about them entirely. Not like me at all but I was under tremendous stress last year which apparently damaged my brain, such as it is...

**It's not that my friend didn't do things. Just that the realm of their human activity didn't lie exactly under the conditions that legitimize those actions and reactions as remunerated labor aka WORK. They were active in spotted queer community we were/are part of. We tended bars at soli parties, taught people how to fix their own bikes and computers, worked in the production of small experimental films, took care of friends that were ill, dog sat. We also spent a lot of time talking and biking and cooking and drinking beer, feeling the energy that fueled our bodies and putting it into motion for whatever cause. Whatever happened. Pogo.**

TMI, I know. But anyhow, I'm thrilled to be asked, would love to do it, and at the moment have no other commitments either real or imaginary. Won't make any, either.

***The attentive re-signifying of the energy, time and embodiment already invested in the realization of work, opens up a space of political and economic agency, propelled by the resources provided by art and political action, which allows for a double de-alienation of the labor invested in the undertaking of this remunerated labor.***

In the clear, critical light of day, illusory administrators whisper of our need for institutions, and all institutions are political, and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us. But we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there's nothing wrong with us. We don't want to be correct and we won't be corrected. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good. We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything.

An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfill by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented.

**My friend was a writer. Is a writer. And a film editor. They made their bare minimum with that. Bare minimum in [SAME CITY NAME AS BEFORE] then was real bare. Also because there were so many other kind of exchanges that were not abitered by government approved currency, but remained in murky fields of friendship, camaraderie, sluttiness, quid pro quo, and a fat etcetera of barter systems and gifts and presents born from a sense of time vaguely detached from the yoke of money.**

My glamorous bi-coastal lifestyle is in its nascent (delusional) stage, much like my ability to cope.

**At the time I received that statement from my friend with STUPOR I wasn't really aware of these things, of the difference in the materiality of time and its direct relationship to**

**capital and the direction and intentionality of our activities, of our actions and emotions.**

*In my attempt to dig into the unacknowledged realms of political action that lay between the extremes of ideological declamation and everyday experience, I ended up thinking about the **economy of ambition** that operates in our process of subjectivation as socialized individuals.*

One of the conclusions they drew from the failures of the student-worker uprising was that the revolution of the cultural sphere could not wait until after the workers' revolution.

**At the time when [SAME NAME] told me that I was looking for a J O B I was working at a gallery that was a perfect metonym of [SAME CITY] mainly because it's relationship to money was mostly delusional. They had some good intentions but bad manners and they paid me shit but shit was rent [SHELTER] and left me enough [the measure of discontent] to feed myself. Then my hustling skills carried me nicely but tightly to the end of the month. But I was getting tired of that. I wanted more. I wanted a job that would allow me to do more things. What? I wasn't sure about that.**

**I started a job at a gallery because I was tired of my precarious underpaid unstructured aimless situation. Also because living in [OTHER CITY] without working all the time can make one feel like a pariah. It wasn't that I had finally decided to capitulate (or at least that's the narrative I'm sticking to). I felt a manifold desire for recognition, a point around which to focus my energies, and some regular means to pay my bills. It was also a choice made out of disillusionment: feeling that I was working so hard in a specific environment and not getting anywhere, deciding to say "fuck it" and to work somewhere where I felt valued. I often feel like I'm performing, like I'm playing the deepest game. Is that naive? I still don't really know what I want.**

*Ambition is an ambiguous term, a substantive that does not always enjoy a positive interpretation. It is good to be ambitious in the right amount, but an excess of it can potentially become a social problem, prompt to a punitive exclusion of the ambitious subject. At the same time, there are ambitious communities, perhaps not necessarily identified as such (meaning that those communities don't particularly perceive the term as characteristic of their identity), but where the absence of this emotion/affect is understood as an absolute handicap.*

*In the arduous terrain of generalization, ambition is usually understood as a dubious characteristic within leftist political groupings, usually connected with greed, the desire for accumulation, and the will to power necessary to achieve it. Therefore, the space in which those desires for power-filled recognition get structured and choreographed tend to be an opaque dimension of the individual's subjectivity, usually not fully disclosed in the social realm. The "outing" of professional/career/political ambitions is usually balanced with altruistic justifications tied to their ends that signify the transitory means as mere steps towards a larger good for a wider community. However, the power, potential and political weight of these fantasies that strive to become realities, is certainly crucial.*



Fred Lonidier, UCLA Bored To Death, 1982/2014. Photo: Mark Waldhauser. Courtesy PARTICIPANT INC

**I knew I wanted an IPHONE.**

**I wanted an iPhone and I didn't want to have to count cents every time I bought something. I started to be very aware of how my DESIRE was shaped and triggered by the stuff people carried on them, that surrounded them. That became more acute in [ANOTHER CITY NAME IN A RICHER COUNTRY WITH AN INTENSE SENSE OF FASHION]. There the correlation between people's belongings and their social status and the weight of their presence became clearer. Pardon my naïveté. This was years ago. However that material transformation of the self through the collection of commodities that identify us in particular social contexts hasn't ceased to amaze me. Also it hasn't ceased or eased its presence. It's just different. Different contexts, different "needs". Who has a Prius?**

Hi [Name]! God I sent a 5-million page text to you two weeks ago but now I think maybe I sent it into the ether! Have mightmarish thing going on with [phone company]. YES PLEASE RESEND! Sorry I was out of touch. Too hard to explain, I'm teaching right this second- let me get to motel and get some sleep- im so glad to hear from you!

*The political signification of our ambitions opens up the dense political space of nuanced negotiation that occurs when a recognizable ideology has to confront the particularities of contingent existence, where the compromises of political claims take place in response to the incidences of a context. I have no idea where this is leading to, the only thing I know is that I have run out of language to talk about my political feelings, and that my struggle veers towards the compilation of a vocabulary, spoken or performed, that allows me to articulate my desires and experiences.*

**I come from hard workers. A and B taught me to work hard to be free, to love your job to be happy. The luckiest thing you can achieve is a job you love to do because, my dear, you are going to have to do it all your life for a bunch of years until you retire, if you are lucky (I add). A and B live and work in Europe. Who knows where they will die.**

#### ***Bending the limits of the labor agreement***

*In this intention to a more honest approach to the gap between our ideals and our actions comes when we will finally speak honestly about how our desire for work trumps our political commitments—to the most intimate level—regarding the conditions we are willing to perpetuate and the kind of labor relations we would willfully endure.*

**When I started school as a little willful kid I started a bit earlier because turns out I talked a lot and saw my sister (older) leaving every day and wondered where and war and thought it must be so FUN to go to that place.**

#### **SCHOOL**

**And then she would come back home and sit down with those thick books and write on ruled notebooks with perfectly tempered and symmetric handwriting. All that looked pretty appealing to me. So I asked and begged and declaimed that i wanted to go to school and A was like "well if you so insist I guess you can go you must be ready".**

**After 2 weeks going to kindergarten, meeting the other kids and checking it out I went back to A one evening and solemnly proclaimed that that was fine but I already got it. Sure school was alright but I was done with it. I didn't really needed to go the next day. A rose an eyebrow and answered "Babe, you only have begun."**

*I wonder if it would be possible to formulate an option that would productively appropriate the capitalist colonization of the individual' subjectivity and the contemporary anxiety over the impossibility to divide working time from leisure. How could that amalgam be perceptually transformed to work for the 'precariat' subject?*

**I haven't failed a test in my life.**

**I've never missed a deadline.**

**I was all my life an A student at the edge of expulsion for bad temper. I was as a teacher's pet as it gets I was just good at disguising it. I also was always on that threshold called SKEPTICAL.**

**I could take it but barely.**

"Performativity describes this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. ***Bending the limits of the labor agreement***

**It's funny how being in school or in the hierarchical circumstances of work throw us back to that subjectivity of being a teenager. Of forcefully fitting. Of having to bend our desires, our beliefs and our opinions under the demands of a social structure of retribution and reward that often DOES NOT MAKE ANY FUCKING SENSE.**

C: Everyone involved in our projects came out with the feeling of being part of a temporary community. The way in which the form of our projects was permeated by the politics that mobilized them— I see this as a huge achievement. An exercise of coherence not easy to realize at times.

A: I think that political permeation of form conveys affect and attention. I hope our work can accomplish that kind of representation.

*The repurposing of labor towards a social and political goal entails the investment of the individual within a system of solidarity that undermines the ideological precepts championed by capitalist hegemony: individualism, personal success, symbolic and economic accumulation, and private sacrifice for the corporate cause.*

The program must be open. We have to dig deeply to show how things have been historically contingent, for such and such reason intelligible but not necessary. We must make the intelligible appear against a background of emptiness, and deny its necessity. We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: what can we make work, what new game can we invent?

**Because the person in charge is a human being imbued with power you have to abide to. They can be great they can be smart they can be dumb as fuck a fucking doorknob. Some times. Worst case scenarios. We all have our own. They differ in degrees of vexation, difference tends to be qualitative instead of quantitative. Still I feel like most of what I do is looking for work. I apply I ponder I think I write I talk I email I text I deliver I hustle I lift I drag I seduce I read I show I finagle I perform I compromise my desires often but not as often as in other places. And that action of compromising is ripe with a feeling that it's hard to describe but taste like the death of love or freedom.**