

# STATION

## **WFH (Work From Home)**

On my daily commute during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, I passed a digital billboard that flashed the words:

*WORK FROM HOME* / *IF YOU CAN*

The phrase 'work from home' kept running through my head and, amidst a barrage of news articles I was reading daily about the state of the world, the kernel of an idea formed.

'WFH' is an abbreviation coined by corporate industries and used to notify colleagues that someone is working from home rather than reporting to an office. Many of us have been working from home the past few months, as we attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Digital technologies, while making it possible for more of us to work remotely and to continue working throughout a pandemic lockdown, also mean that our work has infiltrated our leisure time. We can now (and often do) work anywhere and at any time.<sup>i</sup> In a recent episode of the podcast 'This American Life', guest host Bim Adewunmi suggested that rather than describing our current situation as 'working from home', a more apt description would be 'living at work'.<sup>ii</sup>

But being able to work from home is a privilege. It requires – first and foremost – a home; one that is safe, and that has access to the Internet and the equipment and technologies required for remote work. A recent campaign for Big Issue – the magazine sold on the streets by homeless, marginalised and disadvantaged people – titled 'Working *for* home' reminds us that not everyone can work from home, even during a pandemic.

The qualifier 'if you can' on that digital billboard also points to the unequal state of the workforce. Workers in the service industry are largely unable to work from home, meaning many have either lost work or are required to continue reporting to their workplace, putting themselves and their families at risk. Frontline workers are disproportionately women, migrants, people of colour and people from lower socio-economic communities – not least because the work they do has traditionally been undervalued and underpaid. This highlights, as Amnesty International reported recently, 'a fundamental contradiction in our political economy; that we've put the least value on work that is most critical for survival of our economies, systems, and society'.<sup>iii</sup>

One of the outcomes of our changed work environment and conditions has been a renewed social engagement with the politics at play in how and where we work, who does what work, and what types of work are valued or considered 'essential'. It is clear that the systems we exist within are failing many people, but neoliberal ideology puts the onus on the individual to succeed within these systems. This often means accepting underemployment, unpaid or underpaid work, wage theft, precarious work and increasing casualisation. As a consequence of pre-existing inequalities, what is undeniable is that we have not all been affected equally by this pandemic.

*WFH (Work From Home)* was developed in response to our current situation. I invited four artists whose practices have long explored issues of work, labour, productivity, systems of production, and how we function within contemporary neoliberal capitalism. The exhibition seeks to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and amplified existing structural inequalities in our society, and to tease out some of the ideas that many of us are grappling with at the moment.

Why should we look to artists to explore these social and political issues? In the important essay 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy', Hito Steyerl states that contemporary art not only reflects the politics of contemporary work, but rather, 'the production of art presents a mirror image of postdemocratic forms of hypercapitalism that look set to become the dominant political post-Cold War paradigm'.<sup>iv</sup> It makes sense that artists interrogate the issues that affect them, and over the years many artists

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have created art about the politics of work. In a recent context, David Attwood and Francis Russell write in their book *The Art of Laziness: Contemporary Art and Post-Work Politics*, “The artist has become the model for the precarious professional—a worker who is expected to view their low-paid and unstable work as a calling that requires rigorous training and personal investment.”<sup>v</sup>

A common idiom states ‘if you love your work, you’ll never work a day in your life’. But for most people in the creative industries, the reality may be that if your work is also your passion, you will work constantly because there will be no boundaries between work and non-work. Kay Abude’s ongoing project *LOVE THY LABOUR* explores conceptions and conditions of work, labour and systems of production. The ironic phrase ‘love thy labour’ prompts us to consider the rhetoric of making art as a ‘labour of love’, which attempts to justify the fact that many artists subsist on chronically low wages and need to subsidise their income with other (often casual and precarious) work, often as educators, arts administrators or service workers.

Abude initiated *LOVE THY LABOUR* in 2017 as a project investigating the critical possibilities between the presentation space of the gallery and the production site of the studio. Created in a residence at Bus Projects, Melbourne, in collaboration with Spacecraft Studio, it involved the artist gaining insight into the operations of the screen-printing workshop. This carried on from Abude’s previous works that examined factory work and systems of production, including a performance piece titled *Production Line*, in which she simulated factory conditions and performed as a worker enacting menial tasks.

When Abude’s family migrated to Australia from the Philippines in 1986, her parents, like many migrant workers, had to swap their ‘white collar’ jobs for ‘blue collar’ work. Her mother worked in an electrical factory, and brought home electrical components that she taught her daughters to assemble. When Abude told her parents she wanted to go to art school, they agreed on the provision that she also study dressmaking, so that she would have a ‘valuable’ trade to fall back on. It is, after all, only the privileged few who can survive on a labour of love.

For the 2018 Auckland Art Fair’s Projects program, Abude produced a series of *LOVE THY LABOUR* garments to be worn by the workers servicing the fair – deliberately drawing attention to the often-invisible forms of labour that function at the high end of the art world. The artist aligned herself with the workers by printing the fabric and constructing the garments herself. At the fair, Abude chose to perform as a fair guide, working alongside the paid workers. In STATION’s gallery space, Abude’s garments, exhibited without bodies to activate them, point to the current situation, in which the workers have gone home. The new work from home culture has consequently shifted the work of care from the paid economy (schools, childcare) to the unpaid domestic realm. Women shoulder the majority of the domestic workload at the best of times, but now are bearing the brunt of increased responsibility.<sup>vi</sup>

David Attwood’s *Post New Hoover Core* is a wall-based assemblage that presents a ‘readymade’ Hoover Core vacuum cleaner – found and repurposed from hard rubbish – installed on top of an acrylic vitrine fitted with fluorescent lights. Through a conceptual approach, Attwood’s practice looks to critically explore consumer culture and its influence on human relations and behaviours. In this work, Attwood plays on the vacuum’s associations with domestic maintenance to speak to themes of efficiency, exhaustion and overwork within the realm of ‘reproductive labour’ – associated with care-giving roles including cleaning, cooking, childcare and the unpaid domestic labour force – as well as in society more broadly.

The piece is closely based on Jeff Koons’ infamous 1980s series ‘The New’, in which Koons placed brand new, unused vacuum cleaners atop Perspex display cases, lit by fluorescent display lights. Continuing the legacy of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, the vacuum cleaners, removed from their specified role as domestic cleaning appliances and placed in the gallery, are elevated to the position of art. But while Jeff Koons focused on the ‘newness’ of these objects, Attwood revels in their use. The vacuum presented in Attwood’s *Post New Hoover Core* has been over-used to the point of exhaustion, its scuffed and worn surface a record of years of domestic duty.

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It is worth remembering that the vacuum cleaner, made popular in the early twentieth century by William Henry Hoover, was originally marketed as a labour-saving device intended to liberate middle-class women from housework. Mass production and sales took off after the First World War due to the changing nature of the workforce and an increase in women working outside of the home. In the context of *WFH*, Attwood's work reflects on the increasing burden that the pandemic is having on those who perform domestic labour.

Eugenia Lim's *ON DEMAND* offers a poetic consideration of the performance of labour. A recurring thread in Lim's practice is the investigation of work, labour, collectivity, technology, ethics, and the tension between art and economics in neoliberal capitalism. Acknowledging the shared experiences of workers in the cultural and service industries, Lim placed a call out for workers from the gig economy to collaborate with her as 'worker-performers'. The five who responded are 'independent contractors' who work in the 'gig economy' as drivers, riders and service industry workers for companies including Uber, Airtasker and Foodora. Lim paid each worker-performer the Australian Miscellaneous Award 2010 hourly rate plus superannuation, honouring fair work practices that are not guaranteed for gig workers or independent artists.

Made in collaboration with these de-unionised workers, the work celebrates the power of collective action in an individualised society. Lim listened to her collaborators' experiences of gig work: broken limbs, face surgery, and invisibility as a strategy. The resulting video incorporates the words and experiences of the worker-performers, formed into a spoken word voiceover and layered over the choreographed movement the workers perform alongside the artist. An ongoing touchstone for Lim is Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 'work ballets' – grand-scale collaborative performances that involved workers, trucks, barges, and tons of recyclables and steel – which sought to demonstrate the cooperation and coordination required to carry out city-scale maintenance activities. Continuing Ukeles' work, *ON DEMAND* offers an insight into the precarity, competition and flexibility expected of workers in the twenty-first century.

The artist's presence and participation in the performance is significant. Lim says of the work, 'I'm trying to understand our complicity within neoliberal systems, the structures that enable it and how we live with ourselves.'<sup>vii</sup> The work was originally conceived as a participatory, pedal-powered installation, in which viewers are required to ride bicycles in order to power the video – thereby confronting their own complicity in the system. In *WFH*, the video is presented in single-channel form, with the throbbing soundtrack and poetic narrative permeating the gallery space.

Businesses operating in the gig economy are fuelled by the labour of precarious workers. While gig work is sold to us as a way to reclaim freedom from work, in reality what it means is round-the-clock work. This newly emerged class of workers is called the 'precariat' (precarious proletariat). Their jobs feed on the over-busyness of other workers who require outsourced labour in order to service their basic needs. Neoliberalism has arguably created the conditions for the re-emergence of a new form of feudalism, or 'neofeudalism'. In her essay 'Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?' Jodi Dean writes that the term has emerged to describe 'tendencies associated with extreme inequality, generalized precarity, monopoly power, and changes at the level of the state' – features that are reminiscent of the structures that existed in feudal societies. What we are seeing is the emergence of a contemporary serfdom: 'a property-less underclass [who] will survive by servicing the needs of high earners as personal assistants, trainers, child-minders, cooks, cleaners, et cetera.'<sup>viii</sup>

Sven 't Jolle has long been interested in exploring notions of migration, labour and capital, often through the lens of a critique of capitalist and feudal structures. He shows an affinity with the underdogs of society, the workers on the fringes, the undocumented and overlooked. In creating a new work for *WFH*, 't Jolle has taken as a starting point the figure of a peasant holding a pitchfork – an image that he has been sketching in his notebooks for many years. Recently, in the wake of the coronavirus, he learnt that the fourteenth century pandemic of bubonic plague

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(known as the Black Death), which killed one third of Europe's population, led to a wave of peasant uprisings that hastened the breakdown of feudalism.

The work draws upon 't Jolle's previous group of sculptures, titled *Out of Touch / Boze Brievenbussen (Angry Mailboxes)*. The artist started exploring the symbology of the mailbox ten years ago, not long after he moved to Australia from his home country Belgium. Intrigued by the makeshift mailboxes he saw on the side of the road in rural Australia, and prompted by the Yellow Vest protests that emerged first in rural and peri-urban areas of France in late 2018, he embarked upon making a series of anthropomorphic mailbox sculptures that stood in for the workers.

The title of this work, *1318 Caburn*, suggests a mailbox address: a number and family name. The number 1318 refers to the year of a peasant revolt in feudal England that occurred in the aftermath of the Black Death. William Caburn was a peasant who was arraigned for refusing to work at the daily rate, spurring on an increase in wages across the country.<sup>ix</sup> In the context of *WFH*, the mailbox, recognisable in the head of the figure, is meant to evoke a home sweet home feeling (or as Sven put it, 'home sweet work from home'), referring to the private home or atmosphere of the resident/worker. In contrast, the peasant figure represents the out of home worker, the worker in the field or, in a more contemporary context, the front line.

Under the conditions of the current pandemic, which has altered our day-to-day lives far more than any other event in recent memory, this exhibition was formulated as a response and a way of processing our changed reality. If we look to history, pandemics and plagues have been fertile ground for uprisings, revolt and reform. Artists can, and do, lead the way.

Laura Couttie, July 2020

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<sup>i</sup> Andy Beckett, 'Post-work: the radical idea of a world without jobs', *The Guardian*, 19 January 2018, [https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/19/post-work-the-radical-idea-of-a-world-without-jobs?CMP=soc\\_567](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/19/post-work-the-radical-idea-of-a-world-without-jobs?CMP=soc_567)

<sup>ii</sup> Bim Adewunmi, 'How to Be Alone', *This American Life*, podcast, episode 711, 20 July 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> Lan Mercado, Mohammad Naciri, and Yamini Mishra, 'Women's Unpaid and Underpaid Work in the Times of Covid-19', *Amnesty International*, 1 June 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/06/womens-unpaid-and-underpaid-work-in-times-of-covid19/>

<sup>iv</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post Democracy' in e-flux journal, *Are You Working Too Much? Post-Fordism, Precarity, and the Labor of Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 32.

<sup>v</sup> David Attwood, Francis Russell, 'Introduction' in Attwood and Russell, *The Art of Laziness: Contemporary Art and Post-Work Politics*, Melbourne: A+A Publishing, University of Melbourne, 2020, p. 5.

<sup>vi</sup> OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus: 'Women at the Core of the Fight Against COVID-19 Crisis', *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, 1 April 2020, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=127\\_127000-awfnqj80me&title=Women-at-the-core-of-the-fight-against-Covid-19-crisis%27](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=127_127000-awfnqj80me&title=Women-at-the-core-of-the-fight-against-Covid-19-crisis%27)

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<sup>vii</sup> Neha Kale, 'Eugenia Lim: Hidden Figures', *VAULT Magazine*, Art Ink, issue 28, Nov 2019–Jan 2020, p. 56.

<sup>viii</sup> Jodi Dean, 'Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 12 May 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism/>

<sup>ix</sup> Richard Power Sayeed, 'What history can teach us about building a fairer society after coronavirus' *The Guardian*, 18 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/18/history-fairer-society-coronavirus-workers-black-death-spanish-flu>