

Artists of the No

Nina Beier & Marie Lund

David Raymond Conroy

Ryan Gander

Dora García

David Sherry

Pilvi Takala

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20 September – 28 October 2012

Artists: Nina Beier & Marie Lund, David Raymond Conroy, Ryan Gander, Dora García, David Sherry, Pilvi Takala

Curated by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

In a society characterised by an imperative to perform, to be productive, to take part in a time-pressured culture of high performance, artists are more than ever pressured to work and conform to the demands of professional activity. This is not the only way. In other, more questionable words, is this the way we really want to work? How do artists manage the imbalance between work and life? Are there creative possibilities in refusal, passivity, procrastination and idleness?

The exhibition Artists of the No ultimately engages with a number of artistic propositions and works that propose a “No” – refusal, uncooperativeness, diversion, postponement, reluctance, and so forth – as a response to an existing demand that takes shape in the imperative, both imposed and imparted, to perform. In doing so – and this is the point at which the exhibition deviates from the claim that creating nothing is better than creating something (failure fundamentalism) – the works rise above socio-economic demand (as well as common thinking and behaviour) by frustrating all expectations: provoking a situation and a number of scenarios in which the potential for difference becomes tangible through imagination and aesthetic experience. Rather than becoming an insufficient gestural proxy to put another artistic act into action, perhaps, the exhibition creates a moment in which specific solutions and answers remain provocatively latent, for the right reasons. How could we possibly afford not to work, to perform – financially and existentially? What it does show is that not to “get with the program”, to break the spell of the pressure to produce for the sake of production, to put aside for a moment the overwhelming and saturated system of infra-artistic mediations, to create some space to breathe, to be and spend some time with oneself, to think, could equally be reached and established through work as a kind of performing dissent. Take your time.

Artists of the No is conceived within the context of Curated by Vienna 2012

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Nina Beier & Marie Lund, All the Best, 2008, dimensions variable, courtesy of Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

The piece All the Best, consists of an instruction to leave all post sent to the gallery for the duration of the exhibition, unopened on the floor. The work is a direct response to the structure of a gallery space, it is a comment on the border between the real and the staged space. Nina Beier and Marie Lund play with social customs often by orchestrating simple situations that allow instinctive human reactions to determine the viewer's experience: the work uses audience members as their medium, relying on their imagination and curiosity to grasp the life of a piece.



David Raymond Conroy, All the books I own but haven't read, stacked up in my house, in a place where the pile reaches from the floor to the ceiling, 19/10/2006, 2006, inkjet print, 102 x 51 cm., courtesy of the artist

28.02.08
Brussels
Dora Garcia

TODAY
TODAY
I wrote
NOTHING

Doesn't matter.

Dora García, Today I Wrote Nothing, (homage to Daniil Kharms), 2009, pen on paper, 21 x 29 cm., courtesy of the artist, from the collection of Boyd Raimond, Amsterdam

Reflecting on productivity in terms of time and energy, García's work Today I Wrote Nothing pays tribute to Avant-garde Russian poet Daniil Kharms who wrote repeatedly in his diary "Today I wrote nothing. It does not matter".



Ryan Gander, [The Last Work](#) (still), 2007, video installation, 37 min. 04', courtesy of Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

[The Last Work](#) is a video made before the artist took a one year sabbatical; the video is projected on a small screen built into a room where the floor and the walls are the colour of chroma key blue. The sequence shows, in one continuous shot, the artist's journey from his studio to home on a Winter evening. A voiceover narration attempts to demystify the romanticism around notions of the studio and practice.





David Sherry, Just Popped Out, 2012 (first performed in 2008), performance, courtesy of the artist, lent by Glasgow Life (Glasgow Museums) on behalf of Glasgow City Council

“In this work I sit motionless with my mouth open for two hours. A post-it note is stuck to my forehead. This work has been performed by assistants on two occasions. This work explores the total absence of consciousness in a living body.” (artist statement)



Pilvi Takala, The Trainee (stills), 2008, video installation, courtesy of Galerie Diana Stigter, Amsterdam

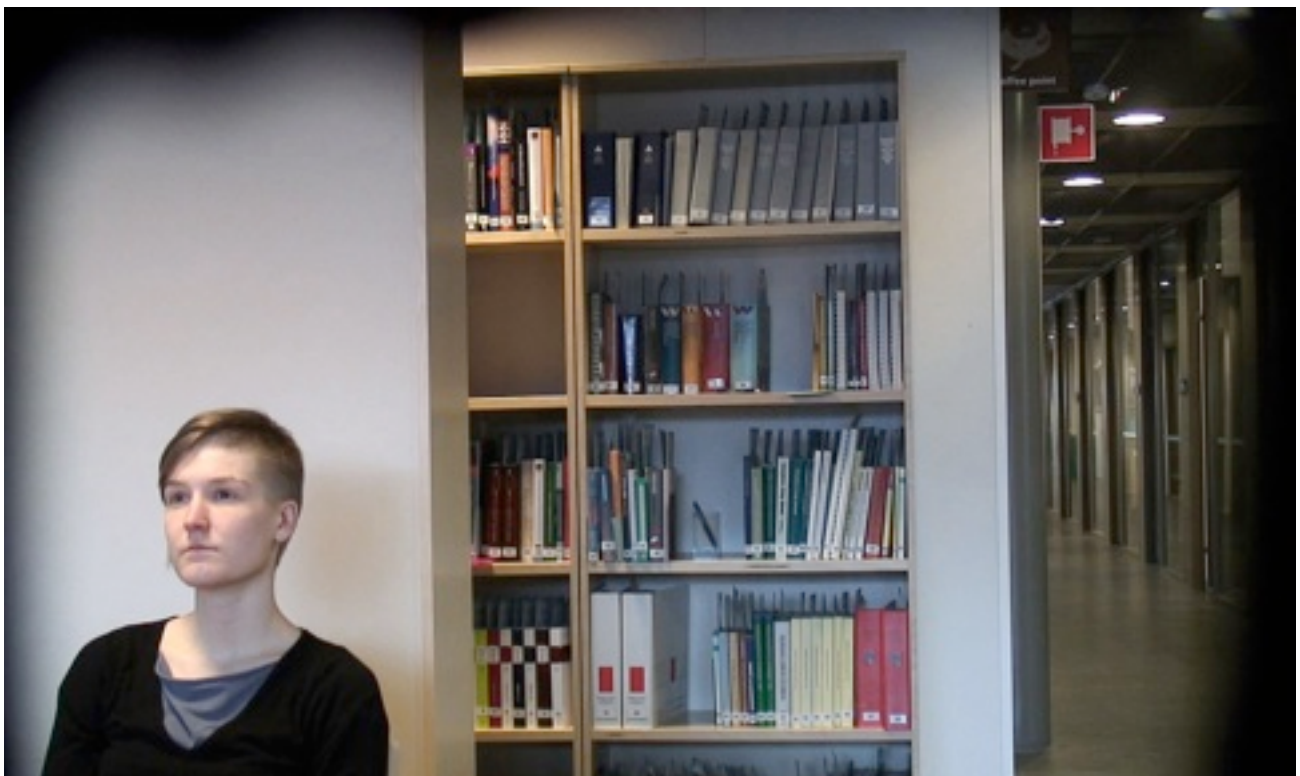
The Trainee has been produced in a collaboration with Deloitte and Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art. In order to realize the project, the artist was working for a month as a trainee "Johanna Takala" in the marketing department of Deloitte where only few people knew the true nature of the project.

During the month long intervention an initially normal-seeming marketing trainee starts to apply peculiar working methods. Gradually she shifts from the position of someone others believe normal to the object of avoidance and speculation. The videos and slideshow reveal a spectrum of ways of looking after the odd member in a group. Sincere interest and bewildered amusement is juxtaposed with demands directed at the superior regarding the strangely behaving worker.

We see the trainee sitting at her workstation in the consults' open plan office space or in the tax department library all day doing nothing. One of the videos shows her spending an entire day in an elevator. These acts or rather the absence of visible action slowly make the atmosphere around the trainee unbearable and force the colleagues to search for solutions and come up with explanations for the situation.

Masking laziness in apparent activity and browsing Facebook during working hours belong to the acceptable behavioural patterns of a work community. However, sitting in front of an empty desk with your hands of your lap, thinking, threatens the peace of the community and breaks the colleagues' concentration. When there is no ready method of action, people initially resort to avoidance, which fails to set their mind at ease when the situation drags on.

What provokes people in non-doing alongside strangeness is the element of resistance. The non-doing person isn't committed to any activity, so they have the potential for anything. It is non-doing that lacks a place in the general order of things, and thus it is a threat to order. It is easy to root out any on-going anti-order activity, but the potential for anything is a continual stimulus without a solution. (artist statement)



Artists

Nina Beier, b. 1976, Aarhus, Denmark
Lives and works in London, England

Marie Lund, b. 1975, Hundested, Denmark
Lives and works in London, England

David Raymond Conroy, b. 1978, Reading, England
Lives and works in London, England

Ryan Gander, b. 1976, Chester, England
Lives and works in London, England

Dora García, b. 1965, Valladolid, Spain
Lives and works in Brussels, Belgium

David Sherry, b. 1974, Newry, Ireland
Lives and works in Glasgow, Ireland

Pilvi Takala, b. 1981, Helsinki, Finland
Lives and works in Istanbul, Turkey and Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Artists of the No - An Analogy of Examples

by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

Close your Facebook, read this text:

In a society characterised by an imperative to perform, to be productive, to take part in a time-pressured culture of high performance, artists are more than ever pressured to work and conform to the demands of professional activity. This is not the only way. In other, more questionable words, is this the way we really want to work? How do artists manage the imbalance between work and life? Are there creative possibilities in refusal, passivity, procrastination and idleness?

1. Work is generally understood as visible, or at least sensible productivity that can be converted into capital. What could be considered as the opposite of this work? This reminds me of the book Artistes Sans Oeuvres (1997) by Jean-Yves Jouannais in which he presents a survey of artists whose work is, misquoting Flaubert: present everywhere and visible nowhere. The artists Jouannais assembled reject a strictly productive approach to art, and do not feel compelled to create works to reaffirm their status as creators. They prefer life to the dead hand of museums and libraries, and are generally more concerned with being (or not being) than doing. Life is their art as much as art is their life – perhaps even more so.

Among a selection of larger-than-life figures such as Jacques Vaché, Marcel Duchamp and Arthur Cravan, Jouannais introduces the character of Félicien Marboeuf (1852-1924): an author who entertained such a lofty idea of literature that his works were to remain imaginary. Marboeuf was created as a fictional character by Jouannais, having virtually published nothing except for his evocations and references on the pages of others, he symbolises one of the anonymous artists without work. Perhaps, in both praise in disdain, for most, Marboeuf has come to represent an oppositional force to self-empowering careerists and market-driven activities – words that must have sound foreign to him: delineating a stance in opposition to the commodification of the arts that ran in parallel to the Industrialisation. Another prime example is provided by the fin-de-siècle dandies who reacted to this phenomenon by producing ‘nothing’ but gestures.

2. My art is that of living, Marcel Duchamp famously declared, Each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral; it's a sort of constant euphoria.

3. Another oft-employed figure and motif for art projects and exhibitions of the past decade is Bartleby, the protagonist from Herman Melville's short story Bartleby the Scrivener (1853). I am probably preaching to the converted here, for we must not squander these pages on classics we have all read. Have we? Bartleby is a copyist at a Wall Street law office who one day, for reasons unknown, mysteriously stops working. When asked to perform a certain task, he doesn't say "NO" – period. Bartleby doesn't exactly refuse to work, he simply, to the bewilderment of his boss and colleagues, keeps repeating the phrase "I would prefer not to" (note: Artistes Sans Oeuvres is subtitled I would prefer not to), leaving the office and its employees in a state of aporia. Eventually, Bartleby prefers not to leave when the office moves out and is consequently imprisoned. In prison he stops eating - the ultimate refusal - and dies. Bartleby, the anti-hero of modernity.

[...] I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to me that my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning. I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply, "I would prefer not to."

"Prefer not to," echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. "What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it," and I thrust it towards him.

"I would prefer not to," said he.

4. Enrique Vila-Matas' Bartleby & Co. (2000) is a metafiction about the nature of literature itself. The title, guess what, takes the figure of Melville's Bartleby as the emblem for any writer who cannot – or won't – write any more. The book is written in the form of a diary with eighty-six entries in which the narrator – a poor and lonely writer with a hump – after having published one book on the impossibility of love, sets out to index the Writers of the No. In doing so, he abandons real life in favour of a life within the confines of literature, totally detached, ad nauseam: engaging in an act of not writing a text of his own, but rather creating a landscape of footnotes to an invisible text. Bartleby's "company" includes those writers who decide not to write and declare an end to their writing career, or they encounter the impossibility of writing (through fear, sheer inability, a general refusal, writer's block, and so forth), or the few who commit suicide as the ultimate statement of non-writing.

37) I admit that the excerpt by Valéry that Derain has chosen for me is a condensed pearl of Monsieur Teste: "Monsieur Teste was not a philosopher or anything like it. He was not even a man of letters. For this reason, he thought a lot. The more one writes, the less one thinks."

5. In the Hunger-Artist, one of four short stories written by Kafka in 1924, we come across a circus act in which the artist subverts a refusal into an art, the art of starving to be precise. His voluntary starvation, trying to take his act to the next level by not eating for extended periods of time, in search of perfection, is subjected to a decline in interest from the audience that used to be so in praise of his work.

[...] Why stop at the end of forty days? He could have gone on for longer, much longer; why stop now, when he was in prime starving form, if indeed he had even got there yet? Why did they want to cheat him of the fame of starving for longer, not only of becoming the greatest hunger-artist of all time, which he probably already was, but of outdoing himself to a quite stupefying degree – because he felt no limits had been set to his gift for hunger. [...]

6. Reportedly, Gerhard Richter used to have a poster next to his phone with one single word printed on it in big letters: NO.

7. The artist Mladen Stilinović in The Praise of Laziness (1998) writes the following: Artists in the West are not lazy and therefore not artists but rather producers of something. Their involvement with matters of no importance, such as production, promotion, the gallery system, the museum system, the competition system (who is first), their preoccupation with objects, all that drives them away from laziness, from art. Just as money is paper, so a gallery is a room.

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1. Jean-Yves Jouannais, Artistes Sans Oeuvres: I would prefer not to, Paris: Editions Verticales, 2009.
Originally published in 1997 by Éditions Hazan.
2. Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971.
Excerpt from chapter 4. I like Breathing Better than Working, p. 72.
Originally published as Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp by Éditions Pierre Belfond, Paris, 1967.
3. Herman Melville, Bartleby the Scrivener, New York: Melville House Publishing, 2010.
Excerpt from pp. 17-18.
Originally published in Putnam's Magazine in November, 1853.
4. Enrique Vila-Matas, Bartleby & Co., London: Vintage, 2005.
Excerpt from entry 37, p. 93.
Originally published by Editorial Anagrama, S.A., Barcelona, 2000.
5. Franz Kafka, Metamorphosis and Other Stories, London: Penguin Books, 2007.
Excerpt from A Hunger-Artist in: A Hunger-Artist: Four Stories (1924), p. 255.
6. Excerpt from 'Exhaustion & Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform' by Jan Verwoert from [<http://abstraction.uwaterloo.ca>] (June 3, 2012), p. 92.
7. Excerpt from 'The Praise of Laziness' by Mladen Stilinović, Moscow Art Magazine No 22, 1998, pp. 25-26.
We should also remind ourselves of his work Artist at Work (1978).