

AFTER NYNE

Out of Office: Maria Eichhorn is Exhibiting No Art... As Art

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What strikes the observer as the most salient and significant aspect of Eichhorn's latest work, 5 Weeks 25 Days 175 Hours, is the complete absence of it.

That is; the absence of The Work, and the absence of work full stop.

In her latest piece examining contemporary labour conditions, the staff of the Chisenhale Gallery, a non-profit space in the East End of London, have, at the artist's request, withdrawn their labour for the eponymous duration of the show.

Its inception dates back to July last year when the artist visited the gallery to talk about the concept with its employees and interview them about their feelings regarding their jobs; the transcripts of which are available to view on the gallery's website and comprise some of the few tangible outputs of Eichhorn's piece.

Many months later, on the 23rd April, Chisenhale would host a symposium featuring lectures by Isabell Lorey, a political theorist at the European Institute of Progressive Cultural Policies, and Stewart Martin, associate professor of philosophy and fine art at Middlesex University - whose lectures and resulting open audience discussions were recorded and have also been made available on the gallery website. The function of the symposium was as a platform to bring the piece into the spotlight and offer it to the scrutiny of the public audience, after which, the gallery would close its doors.



Maria Eichhorn
5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours

23 April – 29 May 2016

For the duration of Maria Eichhorn's exhibition, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, Chisenhale Gallery's staff are not working. The gallery and office are closed from 24 April to 29 May 2016. For further information please visit www.chisenhale.org.uk.

The exhibition opened with a symposium on 23 April, exploring contemporary labour conditions, featuring lectures by Isabell Lorey and Stewart Martin and chaired by Andrea Phillips. Audio recordings from the symposium are available at www.chisenhale.org.uk.

And it is at this point that the framework is set. An empty, closed building, voided of its contents both human and object. In requesting the closure of the gallery and the cessation of work by its staff, Eichhorn has created a negative space; a vacuum. A spatial vacuum existing in the gallery which has a relative and parallel temporal vacuum which operates in the lives of the staff. It is this temporal vacuum that is the as-yet-unrealised artwork. It must necessarily be filled, and therefore reified, by the actions of the staff and the activities they choose to fill it with.

This is a familiar theme in Eichhorn's body of work. For her 2011 exhibition in the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland she spent the whole budget on renovations for the gallery - thus displacing the manifestation of *The Work* onto the builders and contractors whom the money employed. The gallery remained open, but empty. And by way of description, the exhibition catalogue merely listed the prices and names of those who were contracted.

5 Weeks... is a piece full of contradictions, realised through many layers of meaning. An austere gesture of unconditional generosity. It operates within the logic of an institutional structure, yet it is only able to exist at all by disengaging fully from it. It takes the form of a gift that is unable to be fully given or accepted - for it must be given free of debt in order for the recipient to truly benefit, but as soon as it is recognised as such, the recipient becomes indebted and so the gift is annulled.

'Subjects' social relationships and the way they interact can become economically valuable and change the paradigm of working conditions, says Isabell Lorey in her symposium lecture.

'It becomes more and more difficult to interrupt work as it encroaches into the private social sphere. Sociality made productive contributes to the widespread belief that what is fun should not be paid.'

Eichhorn's piece challenges us to confront this idea and consider what it really means to work and to not work. It asks of us: When we are given the gift of free time, what are we actually receiving?

One might question the artist's authority to bestow this gift to the gallery staff. But her role as the artist, and the staff's role as actors, and the gallery's role as stage is not only relevant but integral to the point being made.

It is a comment on the de-valuation of creativity, the commodification of social relationships and the normalisation of learning as a legitimate substitution for paid work.

Eichhorn, much like a gallery owner, has created the space within which *The Work* and the work takes place. She has made agents of all who engage with or react to it, no matter whether actively or passively. And in so-doing, these agents cannot help become provocateurs.

While all the time, all that's required of the artist is that she merely sits back and does...nothing.

www.chisenhale.org.uk
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