

**The artist as
manager and
worker: The artist
creates and
completes a task
Helen Molesworth
(2003)**

DURING THE 1960S, MANY artists began to explore new ways to make art. No longer content with the historically sanctioned divisions among drawing, painting, and sculpture, and equally dismissive of art's traditional skills of mimetic representation, artists instead confronted a fundamental question: What is art? They increasingly came to define art as anything an artist did. Bruce Nauman asserted: "If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio . . . you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around the studio."¹ Yet throughout the 1960s, artists rarely just sat around in their studios. Many responded to this newly liberated idea of art by assigning themselves a task—often delineated by time or by the physical limitation of a material—and then subsequently performing that task.

THE ARTIST AS MANAGER AND WORKER

The Artist Creates and Completes a Task

In creating and then performing these assignments, artists were replicating the roles of both manager and worker in the production of art: managers assign tasks that workers perform.

These artistic experiments are notable for their almost total lack of interest in the finished product. For the most part, as artists shifted emphasis and interest away from the art object as a finished product, they grew increasingly interested in the activity of making art. This work came to be known as Process art. The emphasis on process was, in essence, a foregrounding of acts of artistic labor. Video, film, and photography were often used to document these activities, transforming artists' labor into a form of performance. This is certainly the case in Bruce Nauman's and Richard Serra's studio films. For instance, in *Hand Catching Lead*, Richard Serra filmed himself catching (and failing to catch) strips of falling lead. Bruce Nauman's video *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms* documents the artist trying to create a rhythmic system of bouncing balls in his studio. In an early and defining exhibition, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Marcia Tucker wrote: "Since the emphasis is on the activity, the piece must be analyzed in terms of the kind of work that has gone into its making."²

In examining this "kind of work," one finds that although these tasks or processes may have mimicked the logic of managerial and manual labor, they also refuted it. The primary motivation for the twentieth-century division of labor into managerial and manual realms was the symbiotic logic of efficiency and profit. Introduced by Frederick Winslow

Frank Stella
Vito Acconci
William Anastasi
Robert Morris
Chris Burden
Tom Friedman
Hugh Pocock
Performance
Bruce Nauman
Richard Serra
Feminism
Eleanor Antin
Mierle Laderman Ukeles
Martha Rosler
Wage Labor
Edward Kienholz
Tehching Hsieh
David Hammons
Hope Ginsburg
Francis Alÿs

Hi Red Center, *Cleaning Event*, 1964. Photograph: Minoru Hirata.



Taylor and perfected by Henry Ford, the logic of the assembly line, complete with managers who represented labor through charts and graphs and workers who did the labor through highly repetitive physical motions, transformed the production of mass-produced commodities. Artists of the 1960s, however, continually emphasized process over product in an attempt to alter the framework of value placed on art objects. Instead of valuing art objects as commodities to be bought and sold on the market, they advocated an art practice that valued artistic labor as such. Robert Morris described the critique of Process art by writing: "In a broad sense art has always been an object . . . what is being attacked, however, is something more than art as icon. Under attack is the rationalist notion that art is a form of work that results in a finished product."³ Art was being reconceived as a form of work to be valued in and of itself.

The critique of rationalized work would be taken one step further. Artists may have mimed the division between management and workers, but they also playfully manipulated each form of labor as well. Rather than employing a system of charts and graphs, they often represented work through deliberately flat, grainy black-and-white photographs or film with consummately low production values. Just as artists resisted the polish and professionalism of typical managers, so too they obviated the efficiency and rationality of assembly-line labor. Indeed, most Process artists were interested in what Morris would call "change, contingency, indeterminacy—in short, the entire area of process,"⁴ meaning that the critique of rationality was not only directed against an end product but also addressed equally sharply to the logic of efficiency and planning. In this regard, Process art often entails an obsessive, even ludicrous, form of labor, which is routinely marked by a pervasive sense of "failure," as witnessed in Serra's difficulty catching the lead. HM

1. As quoted in Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 127.

2. *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, exh. cat., organized by Marcia Tucker and James Monte (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1969), 35.

3. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture Part 4: Beyond Objects," *Artforum International* 7 (April 1969): 54.

4. *Ibid.*