

The Workers: Precarity/Invisibility/Mobility **at MASS MoCA Looks at Conditions of Contemporary Labor**

**Timely exhibition, opening May 29, includes two new
commissions which examine MASS MoCA factory history and
local labor struggles**

(North Adams, MA) The Workers, opening on Sunday, May 29, 2011, at MASS MoCA could not be better timed: it coincides with events across the nation and the globe that highlight the precarious state of the worker in the face of recession job losses, a backlash against immigrant laborers, and the weakening of organized labor and collective bargaining rights (which caused a tempest in Wisconsin and beyond this spring). Nor could the exhibition be better sited: MASS MoCA was a bustling factory until 1985 when union strikes during the previous decades helped precipitate the closing of its doors, leaving nearly a third of the population out of work in a city that is still struggling as it transitions from an industrial to a postindustrial economy. The historic plight of North Adams' workers mirrors that of many in the United States and abroad who have lost a way of life to the perennial hunt for cheaper labor, while the low-paid workers who have replaced them struggle for better working conditions.

The social and economic circumstances that created the idea of a "working class" have changed over the last decades. In the United States, industrial labor has increasingly been substituted by forms of administrative and service-oriented labor. At the same time, work has expanded into all the spheres of life. Everyone works more hours than in the past, and the distinction between leisure time and work time has blurred. Today dislocation, mobility, alienation, and invisibility characterize the state of many types of contemporary laborers while making identification and cohesiveness among workers more difficult. The 25 artists and filmmakers featured in this exhibition respond to these conditions, embracing and challenging traditional representations of the worker while making work -- and many of the issues that affect the working class today -- more visible.

The exhibition will include nearly 40 works by a diverse selection of emerging and established international artists, including Claire Beckett, Osman Bozkurt, Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar, Camel Collective, Mircea Cantor, Susan Collis, Jason Dodge, Sam Durant, Harun Farocki, Yevgeniy Fiks, Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre,

Anthony Hernandez, Oded Hirsch, Hugo Hopping, Emily Jacir, Laboratorio 060, Mary Lum, Yoshua Okon, Adrian Paci, Jaume Platsch, Oliver Ressler, Stephanie Rothenberg, Tyler Rowland, Allan Sekula, and Santiago Sierra.

New Commissions

Camel Collective, Laboratorio 060, Mary Lum, and Santiago Sierra are all creating new work for the exhibition. The North Adams-based Lum will present an installation made with fragments from the bottom of ordinary paper bags which travel across the wall of the gallery like workers exiting or entering a factory. Stamped with a name (usually Hispanic) and sometimes a phrase, such as “Made with Pride by,” the accumulation asks viewers to take a closer look at the human side of production and to pay attention to what usually goes unnoticed. In conjunction with this project Lum has also designed a work to be sited on a billboard in North Adams.

Camel Collective’s new work draws on imagery from archival photographs of the 1970 strike at Sprague Electric Company (the site MASS MoCA now occupies) and ruminates on the worker as an image subjected to a historical process of abstraction as well as an image-maker. A caption for one of these photographs in the March, 16, 1970, *North Adams Transcript* in fact described the strikers’ message spelled out in disposable cups on a chain link fence as an “art work.” The artists make connections between the work in the factory then and work in the museum now.

Laboratorio 060 will also engage North Adams’ past and the experiences of former local union members (including several who currently work at the museum) to consider both past failures and future possibilities for organized labor.

Sierra, long known for his provocative work on the subject of labor and economic and power relations, will stage a performance featuring a U.S. soldier, perhaps the most invisible of at-risk workers. The performance work will be staged on the opening weekend and several more times throughout the summer and fall.

Precarity

The exhibition emphasizes the uncertainty shared by a diverse cross-section of workers. Oliver Ressler’s video installation *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt, What Comes Next?* (2010) highlights the dissatisfaction of former Soviet-era factory workers trying to eke out a living as traders in a large market in the post-socialist Republic of Armenia. *Maquilapolis* (2001), a film by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, details the hardships of women working in the multi-national maquiladoras in Mexico. Following them as they fight against the environmental and health hazards they are exposed to, the filmmakers also give them an opportunity to shape their own image.

To create his installation *Canned Laughter* (2009) Yoshua Okon also engaged workers from the maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez, a border city known as much for violence as manufacturing. Okon hired the laborers (many had lost their jobs in the recession) as actors for the fictitious Bergson company which sells canned laughter for sitcoms. Replicating the look of a production line, the installation shows the workers creating their product -- their own laughter -- while addressing what the artist has called “slavery in the age of globalization.”

Allan Sekula, an artist who has been sensitively and critically documenting labor throughout his career, is represented with selections from a series depicting volunteers at an oil spill off the Galician Coast in 2002. In the wake of a string of disasters from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina and the recent BP oil spill, the volunteer workforce is more visible. Yet such workers are vulnerable to the same consequences and hazards associated with the power

structures governing traditional work – and with even fewer rights. (The recent legislation passed to provide aid to 9/11 first responders acknowledges the need to remedy such situations).

Anthony Hernandez's photographs from his series *Landscapes for the Homeless* (1989-2007) remind us of the fate of many who cannot find employment or pay their bills, while suggesting the labor inherent in surviving on the street.

Invisibility

Historical representations of the working class have tried to make the worker more visible, but the images we know – from Walker Evans' images of sharecroppers to Rosie the Riveter – no longer seem apt. Several artists in the exhibition consider former precedents while they attempt to construct a new picture of today's worker. Tyler Rowland's piece, *The Stonebreakers (All the Objects Needed to Install a Work of Art)* (2004-2006), references Gustave Courbet's seminal painting of 1849, one of the earliest examples of Social Realism, while invoking the workers usually invisible in the museum setting. Yevgeniy Fiks portrays members of the U.S. Communist Party against the backdrop of their offices in a style reminiscent of the Socialist Realist paintings that celebrated the proletariat.

Harun Farocki's video installation *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades* (2006) is composed of twelve monitors showing a timeline of images of the space outside the factory gates dating from the Lumiere brothers' 1895 film *Workers Leaving the Factory* through Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Focusing on the space outside the factory – a transitory space between work and home – the installation suggests how popular images have left the worker as a kind of cipher, a stand-in for the goods produced in the factory.

Other works mine historical precedents to give context to current conditions. Sam Durant's installation *Dead Labor Day* (2010), based on a gallows structure, refers to Marx's concept of capital as dead labor as well as to the hanging of peaceful labor activists protesting for an 8-hour workday in Chicago's 1886 Haymarket riots. Intended to be used as a break room for workers, the piece makes connections between the attacks on organized labor at the end of the 19th century and those of today, while reflecting on the death penalty.

Mobility

Adrian Paci's *Centro di Permanenza temporanea* (2007) draws attention to the state of limbo in which illegal immigrants are forced to live. Named for a detention camp in Italy, the video was in fact shot in California with a group of dark-skinned workers. The group is seen on an airport tarmac ascending wheeled metal stairs that presumably lead to an airplane. As the figures gather on the steps, which become increasingly packed with bodies, the camera moves away and reveals that there is no plane, and no place for these people to go.

Emily Jacir's 2002 video installation *Crossing Surda (a record of going to and from work)* highlights how the worker is constantly forced to move to more urban areas. Secretly recording Palestinians making their way to their jobs through an Israeli checkpoint past armed soldiers, Jacir suggests the worker's vulnerability to geo-political conflicts and conditions.

While migration is commonplace in today's job economy, the "mobility" required of workers in these times takes on additional meaning in the exhibition which chronicles inspiring evidence of their *mobilization*. Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar's *Made in LA* (2007) presents the story of a group of Latina immigrants working in a sweatshop in

the garment sector who unite to fight for basic labor protections. The film concentrates on the difficulties immigrants have finding their own voice due to their legal status, but ultimately proves the positive consequences of organizing.

Oded Hirsch draws on the model of the kibbutz in Israel where he grew up. Reminiscent of the 16th-century scenes of workers painted by Brueghel, the collaboratively made video follows a group of workers dressed in the classic blue jumpsuits of so many contemporary laborers as they traverse a rural landscape to get to the site where they coordinate to construct a bridge.

Jason Dodge's *In order of imagined altitude, an astronomer, a meteorologist, an ornithologist, a geologist, and a civil engineer cut pockets from their trousers* (2009) consists of five cut-off pockets of the pants used by the different workers listed in his title. The pockets are piled according to a hierarchy underlining the distance that separates each of these workers from earth. The subtle differences in the fabric of each pocket suggest the various professional sectors that each of these worker represents. With this piece, mobility not only implies a geographic displacement but also a transition through class.

Together this diverse selection of artists and strategies will illuminate many of the challenges facing the worker today, while breaking down usual hierarchies and definitions to begin to inspire recognition and solidarity among all of us who work.

Bureau for Open Culture

In conjunction with *The Workers* MASS MoCA curator Susan Cross has invited Bureau for Open Culture -- a nomadic contemporary arts program directed by curator and art historian James Voorhies -- to inhabit one of the museum's buildings for the first four months of the exhibition. Set within a previously unused industrial building on the grounds of MASS MoCA, Bureau for Open Culture presents *I Am Searching for Field Character*, an exhibition series of public conversations, performances, installations, and workshops with a slew of visiting artists, writers, designers, and thinkers, as well as a beer garden which operates every Thursday and Friday night between May 26 and September 30.

I Am Searching for Field Character explores the economic and social character of the cultural laborers—from artists and writers to beekeepers and distillers—who collectively contribute to the lifestyle of a region. It examines this workforce within the context of a postindustrial city that has transformed economically from a site of major manufacturing to a locus for culture and experience. *I Am Searching for Field Character* locates and shapes a portrait of the cultural worker today with an emphasis on his or her precarious economic existence. The series title refers to a 1973 essay by the German artist Joseph Beuys in which Beuys conveys a desire to expand the limits of art through a reconsideration of what it is and a leveling of its hierarchies, ultimately using it to generate ideas about the present moment and future possibilities.

The series will transpire inside architecture built originally for the production of goods and materials. Bureau for Open Culture will occupy what is known as Building 8 in the courtyard of the museum complex. Over the course of four months, Bureau for Open Culture will turn this site into a center for its activities and events. Free and open to the public, this shape-shifting space will be a place of exhibition, performance, workshop, studio, community, and research. Participants include Julia Bryan-Wilson, Sarah Cowles, Dylan Gauthier, Steve Lambert, Timothy

Nazzaro, Nate Padavick, Joseph Del Pesco, Sarah Pierce, Red76, Rachel Sherk, Kendra Sullivan, Temporary Services, Cassandra Troyan and Matthew Stadler.

Additional Programming:

In the fall Stephanie Rothenberg will present an episode of her Second Life talk show live on stage and on-line. The museum will also screen *The Forgotten Space*, a new documentary by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch which looks at the maritime economy's toll on human labor and "the disorientation, violence, and alienation of contemporary capitalism" manifest at sea. The screening will be followed by a conversation with the artist.

Catalogue

MASS MoCA will publish a catalogue in conjunction with the exhibition with texts by several contributors, including the co-curators of the exhibition, Susan Cross and artist Carla Herrera-Prats.

Support

The exhibition is supported in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Opening Reception

Members receive complimentary admission to the opening reception for *The Workers* on Saturday, May 28, from 5:30 - 7:30 PM. Not-yet-members may attend for \$8. There is a private tour of the exhibition with the curators for members at 5 PM preceding the reception. At 8:00 PM country music legend Rosanne Cash will perform in MASS MoCA's Hunter Center. Tickets for the Cash concert are \$39 in advance and \$35 day of show.

About MASS MoCA

MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) is one of the largest centers for contemporary visual and performing arts in the country and is located in North Adams, Massachusetts, on a restored 19th-century factory campus. In the summer MASS MoCA's galleries are open every day from 10 AM – 6 PM. From September 7 through June 30, the galleries are open 11am -5pm every day except Tuesdays. Gallery admission is \$15 for adults, \$10 for students, \$5 for children 6 - 16, and free for children 5 and under. Members admitted free year-round. For additional information, call 413-662-2111 or visit www.massmoca.org. MASS MoCA is an independent 501C3 whose operations and programming are funded through admissions and commercial lease revenue, corporate and foundation grants, and individual philanthropy. Except for an initial construction grant from the Commonwealth, and competitive program and operations grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, MASS MoCA is privately funded: 90% of annual operating revenues are from earned revenues, membership support, and private gifts and grants.