

Nathan Gray in residence  
Clockwise from the top left: Image 1&3: Photography by Tobias Titz, all other images: courtesy of the artist



### *Nathan Gray: Work With Me Here*

In July of 1857, the English art critic John Ruskin delivered two lectures in Manchester —‘a city whose labour conditions,’ Anton Vidokle has noted, ‘had been central to the work of Engels and Marx just a few years earlier’<sup>1</sup> — under the title of ‘The Political Economy of Contemporary Art.’<sup>2</sup> In these lectures, Ruskin parsed the value of artistic labour in relation to education, collecting, patronage, public accessibility, and artistic genius.<sup>3</sup> Much to the annoyance of his contemporaries, of which the painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler was one, Ruskin argued for a direct correlation between the cost-value of an artwork and the hours spent on its production in the studio; in other words, he made a case for artistic production as a form of wage labour.

Over the course of his career, Ruskin famously transitioned in occupation: from art historian and critic to a type of political analyst or social reformer.<sup>4</sup> As both David Throsby and John Bryson have pointed out, however, Ruskin never conceived of artworks as separate from the conditions in which they were produced. Thus, as Bryson writes, Ruskin’s ‘move from art criticism to political economy was a logical step; not so much a change as a development of his thought.’<sup>5</sup>

Today, over a century after Ruskin’s death in 1900, and five decades since the advent of what we call Institutional Critique art, the political economy of contemporary art—the analysis of its governance, its financing and, not least, its industrial relations—is again a key concern for artists and art critics. As artists are increasingly compelled to place somewhat ill-fitting metrics of value around their work (for instance an artwork’s literal ‘value for money’<sup>6</sup>), seek corporate support in addition to or lieu of government funding<sup>7</sup>, try their hand at crowd-sourcing patronage (distributing the burden across friends, families and acquaintances<sup>8</sup>), or seek out part-time, often-casual teaching arrangements at tertiary institutions to support their practice, an analysis of the labour relations that constitute artistic work screams for attention. Indeed these analyses and explorations into artistic labour frequently wind their way back into the artworks themselves.

Such is the case in the work of Nathan Gray, a Perth-born, Melbourne-based artist whose practice is founded upon a radical openness, a wilful resistance to synthesis, and the prolonging of process.<sup>9</sup> The edges of Gray’s works are often mutable, porous—susceptible to intervention, development or change. Frequently, the political, social and environmental conditions in which his artw orks are produced creep through the works’ frames and begin to shape them from the inside out; the work and its context become entangled in mutual corruption. Like Ruskin, Gray conceives of an artwork and the conditions of its production as wholly interdependent. And, also in a way not

unlike Ruskin, who chastised artists for their perceived lack of actual, alienated labour in relation to their artistic production and its cost-value, Gray has made a career out of ostentatiously minimising the labour hours that go into his artworks. As we shall see, he has done this by imposing strict time and economic constraints on the production of his artworks and letting these austere conditions decisively determine the works’ parameters.

In recent years, Gray has been developing an array of methods for circumventing, delegating-away, or parodying the relationship between art and labour. Gray’s artworks have seen him get out of work or set up systems in which the works make themselves or are made by others. He has also devised atypical metrics for determining the cost-value of his artworks—such as cash per metre of sculpture, or per second of video. In *Grow Wild*, a 2008 group exhibition at Utopian Slumps, Collingwood curated by Sleep Club, Gray set up a roll of butcher’s paper, then hung a handful of coloured permanent markers from a string mobile, placing them both in front of an electric fan and thereby delegating the task of drawing to something other than him. (This drawing was then cut up and sold at \$50 per metre.) His 2007 exhibition *Love Purity Accuracy*, also at Utopian Slumps, Collingwood, comprised an exquisite whispers drawing project, whereby viewers to the exhibition undertook a portion of the exhibition’s artistic labour themselves by drawing a picture based on the preceding drawing lying on top of the pile (which had been produced by the previous visitor). This is one way in which Gray’s works ‘rediscover the social body around making,’ as described by Design Hub curators Fleur Watson, Kate Rhodes and Nella Themelios.<sup>10</sup>

For his January 2014 Plinth Project work *Queen Size*, Gray committed to executing literally the first idea that popped into his head as the artwork, using American electronic-disco music pioneer Arthur Russell’s personal mantra: ‘first thought—best thought.’ This resulted in the artist installing a queen-size mattress, the kind that one might see dumped on a street, atop the statue-less plinth in Edinburgh Gardens, North Fitzroy. Shortly after *Queen Size*, in April 2014 Gray exhibited two new, related bodies of work at Utopian Slumps in Melbourne’s CBD titled *Works Under Thirty Seconds* and *Things that Fit Together*. The un-ironic titles communicate—as economically and straightforwardly as possible—the self-imposed regulations of the works: that, in the series of sculptures lacing the gallery’s floor, the constituent objects be either very cheap (under \$5) to purchase or be found lying around the artist’s studio, and that they fit and stay together without screws or glue; and that the series of videos documenting actions take place in a period of time no longer than half a minute.

*Work With Me Here* presents for the first time the complete collection of films in the *Works<30s* series in Design Hub’s Project Room 2 space, and the series of video works

are extended and complemented by a number of different architectural and institutional devices that allow viewers to examine the themes which course through the videos in different ways. To this end, *Work With Me Here* is divided into five different ‘zones,’ devised by architecture group SIBLING who worked on the exhibition’s design. The zones are: 1) the Noticeboard, which the artist uses to communicate messages to the audience when he is not in the space; 2) Quarantine—an area used for storing unfinished artworks; 3) Rejuvenation—a netted, vertical relaxation station replete with hanging hammocks and viewing platforms, designed by SIBLING; 4) the Stage, which is used as a set for an on-going, live talk-show in which Gray is the host; and 5) the complete series of *Works<30s*. Around the Rejuvenation and Stage zones are five desks, which form an open studio. This is where Gray makes new work, and stages conversations and collaborations with visitors and guests throughout the duration of the exhibition. (The desks are also used by RMIT student volunteer invigilators, who sometimes do their own work there.)

The zone of the Stage is the set for a talk-show in which Gray interviews guests, mostly other artist practitioners (such as Frances Barrett, Léuli Eshraghi, Caitlin Franzmann, and Lou Hubbard<sup>11</sup>), about their obsessions and interests.<sup>12</sup> As a mechanism for generating new artworks, the Stage proposes conversation as its method.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of Gray’s talk-show is for the artist and his invited guests to formulate an idea for an artwork together in real time. The key question around which this conversation pivots is ‘what can you do in under thirty seconds?’ The talk-show is framed by music composed and performed by Melbourne musician Jonathan Michell (of The Ancients and Mum Smokes). The episodes are projected onto three screens around the gallery live, and played back there afterwards.

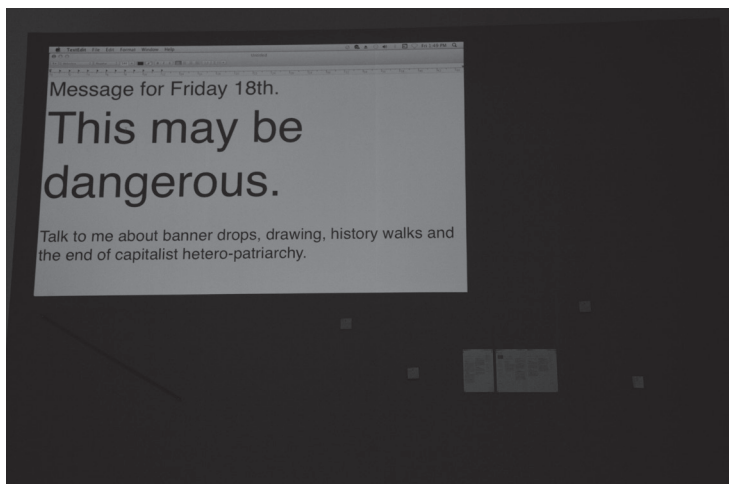
In contrast with previous works by Gray, which are very much materials-oriented (for instance, consider his contribution to *The Material Turn*, concurrently exhibited at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, curated by Rebecca Coates), the works in *Work With Me Here* seek to make visible that which is, according to Claire Bishop, typically ever-present but largely invisible in contemporary artistic production: that is, digital labour.<sup>14</sup> To this end, the open studio comprises workbenches and chairs covered in laminate depicting Photoshop’s canvas pattern (the pattern that indicates transparency). These desks and chairs are bordered by crop marks on the floor (which are usually intended to be cropped out of the finished product). The Noticeboard is Chroma key green—the colour of green screens, also a metonym of invisibility (as Hito Steyerl has explored in her work *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A F\*\*cking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013). The Quarantine area is skinned in vinyl depicting television static, while the central feature of the exhibition, the

hammock scaffold, is the same hue of blue that is thrown by a projector beam when it is not connected to a signal, and the stage that hosts the talk-show is topped by a halo of the colour bars generated by digital cameras. Furthermore, the design of the catalogue is a form of non-design: it is the laying-bare of the catalogue’s InDesign template, with notes about typesetting, headers, and instructions for pagination adorning the pages. Nonsense Latin *lorem ipsum* text filler also creeps into the ends of paragraphs and sentences throughout.

As Gray’s exhibition seems to indicate, we live in an information society in which every interaction in the digital world is, as Laurel Ptak has convincingly argued,<sup>15</sup> either monetised or exploited as a form of unwaged labour. This even applies to formerly affective gestures, such as liking and sharing. By making zones that encourage slacking-off and chatting with friends the central features of the open studio, Gray reframes these kinds of spare-time activities as a legitimate part of an artistic practice—thereby updating and reimagining the wage-able hours that, in Ruskin’s Victorian-era view of the political economy of art, make up artistic work.

### - Helen Hughes

- Anton Vidokle, ‘Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art,’ *e-flux journal*, #43 (03/2012), p. 4/10. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-without-market-art-without-education-political-economy-of-art/>, accessed September 23, 2015
- Republished in 1880 as *A Joy For Ever: And its Price in the Market*.
- Vidokle, ‘Art without Market, Art without Education,’ p. 4/10.
- David Throsby, ‘The Political Economy of Art: Ruskin and Contemporary Cultural Economics,’ *History of Political Economy*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2011), p. 276. DOI 10.1215/00182702-1257397.
- David Bryson, Introduction to John Ruskin, *Unto This Last: The Political Economy of Art; Essays on Political Economy* (London: Dent, 1968), vii.
- ‘Value for money’ is a criteria for fundable projects in the draft guidelines for the newly formed Australian National Program for Excellence in the Arts.
- See for instance the operations of Creative Partnerships Australia.
- One of the most popular mechanisms for crow-fudning in the arts in Australia is Pozible.
- For the best account of this strain of Gray’s practice, see Amelia Barikin (then Douglas), ‘Psychotropicalism: A Manifesto in Search of a Manifestation,’ *un Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2008), pp. 6–11.
- ‘Nathan Gray: Work With Me Here,’ RMIT Design Hub, <http://www.designhub.rmit.edu.au/exhibitions-programs/nathan-gray-work-with-me-here>, accessed September 23, 2015.
- Hubbard’s focus was on death, Eshraghi’s was on the processes decolonisation, Franzmann’s was on the female voice, Barrett’s was on duration, and Guffond’s was on surveillance.
- In this respect, the *Work With Me Here* talk-show relates to another of Gray’s projects titled What do you know? conceived for a residency in St Arnaud in the Wimmera region of Victoria in 2015. Here, Gray asked community members and friends from Melbourne to present fifteen-minute speeches at the local pub about something they know lots about. Topics included butterflies, local history and agriculture.
- Conversation is, after all, a means for producing more content more quickly than a straight-up research paper—as Hal Foster noted (perhaps a little pejoratively) in relation to Hans Ulrich Obrist’s prolific interview series, which, Foster suggested, may stand-in for any of Obrist’s own arguments that might otherwise be developed and resolved in a traditional academic essay or book format. Hal Foster, ‘In Praise of Actuality,’ public lecture, University of Melbourne, Parkville campus, February 26, 2015.
- Claire Bishop, ‘Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media,’ *Artforum*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (50th Anniversary Issue, 2012), pp. 434–441



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