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'Merlin Carpenter: A Refusal of Work'
Room Based, Guzzler,
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Held in place by gravity alone, Merlin Carpenter's first solo exhibition in Australia, *Room Based*, is a simple arrangement of fifteen safety cones placed in an evenly spaced grid on the ground. Situated in the suburbs of Melbourne, far from the global centres of the art world where Carpenter normally shows, the exhibition venue Guzzler is a former garage at the rear of a suburban share-house that has been carefully transformed into a white-walled gallery. One of the few indicators of the low-budget setting is the floor: compacted dirt, rather than polished concrete. Inside the house on the dining room table, the exhibition text reveals that the intellectual labour of the show has been shared with another artist, Tomas Rydin, whose own iteration of *Room Based* is a minimal intervention in a phone booth on the streets of Whitechapel, London, which is on at the same time. The text indicates that despite the social distancing policies and 'stay at home' orders put in place by governments across the globe in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the conceptualisation of the two exhibitions was developed through informal meetings between the pair of artists. Rejecting the institutional language of the didactic museum panel or gallery press release, it is written in cryptic, fragmentary language that can be understood as an attempt to resist the new forms of capital accumulation that are now frequently associated with cognitive or immaterial labour.¹ We might also read the text as a reflection on the intensified fragmentation of social relations under lockdown conditions, an idea that is echoed in the work itself.

Prompted to check-in to each business I visited, as I navigated Melbourne on the weekend of the exhibition opening, my movements were characterised by the kinds of social stoppages produced by safety cones. Safety cones are normally found in a straight line or square, demarcating a hazard, construction site or road maintenance, that is, they are found outside rather than inside. They act as a temporary or ad-hoc boundary, dictate the circulation of bodies and play a role in the organisation of public space. Frequently used at vaccination hubs and quarantine sites, they bring to mind the way that technologies of control have been deployed by governments since the Covid-19 pandemic began. They are markedly different from the objects of personal consumption that Carpenter appropriated for his 2015 exhibition *Poor Leatherette*: a motorcycle, a fridge, a pram and a digital DJ controller luxury goods that were all bound by a similar nostalgic design logic. Instead, the safety cones have a social function, a social use-value that is initially more obvious than their exchange value as commodities, until we reflect on the equivalence created by their repetition. The hazard aesthetics of the safety cones and their re-contextualisation within the gallery setting suggests ideas of risk, circulation, value, labour and exchange. They not only dictate the circulation of bodies through the gallery space, ensuring that visitors maintain social distance, but also bring to mind the way that these cheap commodities circulate around the globe, and, in turn, to how this differs from the circulation of luxury art objects. In this context the safety cones defy and deflate our expectations, occupying the entire space with a militant anti-utilitarianism.

The title, *Room Based*, may refer to the enforced flexibility of where and when someone might work during the Covid-19 pandemic, to working from home, or more specifically, from one's bedroom or living room. It could refer to either the site of production or consum-

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This occurs through re-distribution according to Carpenter. See Merlin Carpenter, *The Outside Can't Go Outside* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018).

ption or to the collapsing of the two. Perhaps it's a way of situating the work in relation to the gallery based structural alterations of an artist such as Michael Asher, or to the 1970s building work of Christopher D'Arcangelo and Peter Nadin, in which the artists literally plastered rooms and made exhibition spaces. Ultimately it remains ambiguous. Both the text and the artwork are open to multiple interpretations and deliberately resist delivering transparent messages. Nevertheless, in this essay I take the work as a starting point to explore issues of labour and the art strike, arguing that *Room Based* foregrounds labour in multiple ways, while also disavowing it. Perhaps most obviously the safety cones have associations of the working-class labour of maintenance and construction. As mass-produced objects, made in a factory in China, their presence also relies on the labouring bodies of unseen others, exposing the necessary labour that makes artistic labour possible.² The repetition of the safety cones within the gallery space mimics the dull, repetitive work of making them, work that offers little challenge or autonomy. Their serial arrangement resembles the minimalist work of the 1960s, when artists began employing factory fabrication and using industrial materials. During that time, which like our own was characterised by social upheaval and widespread protest, minimalist artists such as Carl Andre and others associated with the Art Workers' Coalition identified themselves as workers, formed unions and demanded workers' rights.³ As Julia Bryan Wilson's important book *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* testifies, the artists who employed factory fabrication were very much invested in the political issues facing artists in the 1960s and '70s. Despite the fact that minimalist artists utilised factory-based production, the one-off creations were usually meticulously crafted and produced with the close involvement of the artists. These characteristics, and the fact that manufacturing has largely shifted to the global south since that work was made in American factories in the 1960s, some dedicated specifically to art fabrication, contrasts with the safety cones in *Room Based*.

Artistic labour has traditionally been understood in opposition to the abstract labour of commodity production, because artists, in general, do not sell their labour power to a capitalist who pockets the surplus value or produce standardised, reproducible commodities. For this reason, the now widespread practice of using cheap mass-produced commodities in art production continues to raise the question the value and status of the artist's labour, especially when the objects remain unmanipulated by the artist. The qualitative sameness of the now ubiquitous orange safety cones repeated through the small gallery space places emphasis on this reproducibility, as well as the fact that individual differences of labour are eradicated through their standardised form. Delegating or outsourcing the production of the work to others, rather than using one's own hands or technical drawing and painting skills, as Carpenter has done here, replicates managerial labour, reflecting the broader shift that has taken place in western economies since the beginning of post-Fordism, from manufacturing to service industries. Outsourcing production also reproduces the separation between intellectual and manual skills that has occurred over the course of capitalist modernity, due to the fact that the development of both in workers acts as barrier to the extraction of surplus value.⁴ Employing this strategy critiques romantic understandings of artistic labour in which it, and the artist's subjectivity, are understood as unalienated. It thus refuses the idea that the artist is an autonomous purveyor of meaning situated outside of capital relations, suggesting instead that art has a role to play in value extraction and opening up the division between intellectual and manual labour to scrutiny.

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John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 25.

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Julia Bryan Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2009), 2.

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Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, 42.

Carpenter frequently conscripts his gallerists and the audience into the production of his works, using conceptual strategies that reduce or refuse the activity of his own labour. For his two-year project *The Opening*, which began in 2007 and was presented at seven different galleries, Carpenter staged a series of performances in which the paintings on display were made at the exhibition openings. For each iteration of *The Opening*, an elaborate opening reception was planned and thoughtfully adapted to each new location. At Reena Spaulings in New York (2007), a pianist was hired, vodka and cucumber sandwiches were served, and the gallery was decorated with an elaborate flower arrangement. After a period of time, Carpenter walked up to the blank canvases that hung on the walls with a bucket of black paint and scrawled insulting phrases, including “Die Collector Scum” and “Relax It’s Only A Crap Reena Spaulings Show” across them. As Caroline Busta has convincingly argued, *The Opening* limited production to the opening itself, so that Carpenter would be “making art only during the exhibition’s opening, when he would be ‘working’ anyway.”⁵ Recycling the idea over the course of seven exhibitions allowed Carpenter, who thought of himself as “on strike” for the duration of the project, to preserve artistic labour.⁶ Effectively, *The Opening* provided a structure for systematically refusing to make work.⁷

The first paragraph of the exhibition text for *Room Based* tells us that the work is a general strike. It states: “The work that is not the work. Responsibility is not in the room but not a drift towards lazy emptying, it is a pre-. It is a general strike, it’s self-respect.” In what ways might we understand it as a general strike, or even as a strike at all? Certainly, if we heed the sign-value of the high-visibility safety cones their effect is to block access to the gallery. In fact, as I walked towards the gallery through the unlit backyard at Guzzler on the evening of the exhibition opening, two visitors stood in the doorway, apparently reading their smooth, plastic forms, as precisely such a deterrent. Using the term general strike rather than art strike evokes one of the most well-known art strikes: Lee Lozano’s *General Strike Piece* ran from February to October 1969, during which time the artist withdrew from the social activities of the artworld. *General Strike Piece* read:

Gradually but determinedly avoid being present at official or public ‘uptown’ functions or gatherings related to the ‘art world’ in order to pursue investigation of total personal & public revolution. Exhibit in public only pieces which further sharing of ideas & information related to total personal & public revolution.⁸

While the phrase general strike might suggest a complete refusal to labour, what Lozano was proposing was only a withdrawal from the networking activities associated with being an artist.⁹ Her actual art production continued unabated, until the 5th of April 1970, when she began *Dropout Piece*, which was to be her most substantial and lasting act of withdrawal. Although they were individual acts, solitary efforts to improve her own working conditions, Lozano’s refusals point to the crisis of work that has become increasingly urgent today.¹⁰ *Room Based*, like Lozano’s *General Strike Piece*, is not an attempt to galvanise other artists into participating in an art strike, nevertheless in claiming the work is a general strike, Carpenter orients us towards the problem of how we might organise collectively to change our working conditions.

In recent years art’s critique of labour relations has become more activist and more widespread.¹¹ As the crisis of financialised capitalism has developed into a growing catastrophe, the literature on the issue of artistic labour has burgeoned. This has been

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Caroline Busta, *Merlin Carpenter: The Opening* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), unpaginated.

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Busta, *Merlin Carpenter: The Opening*, unpaginated.

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Busta, *Merlin Carpenter*, unpaginated.

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Jo Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 131.

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Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working*, 131.

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Dave Beech, “To Boycott or not to Boycott?,” *Art Monthly* 380 (October 2014), 11.

¹⁰

Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working*, 129.

accompanied by a growing number of art strikes which, though still relatively rare, are also grounded in a genuine political turn. In the past individual artists, as well as collectively organised ones have withdrawn their labour. By doing so they cast artists as workers and adopt the model of the industrial strike, through which the withdrawal of labour is aimed at disrupting profits or even destroying the economic system. In May 1970, Lozano signed a petition demanding that the New York School of Visual Arts refuse to show work in support of the protest effort against the Vietnam War. This petition was part of New York Art Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression and War in 1970 organised by an offshoot of the Art Workers' Coalition. The strike demanded a one-day closure of the city's galleries and museums. Triggered by the shooting of American students protesting the US military's invasion of Cambodia by the National Guard, it was also a response to the entanglements of museums with the Vietnam War.¹² Seven years later in the UK, Gustav Metzger called for artists to stop working from 1977 to 1980 in an art strike that he declared 'years without art'. He called on artists to not produce work, sell work, allow work to be exhibited or engage with the publicity machinery of the art world during this period. Not a single artist joined him on his strike. These actions formed antecedents for Stewart Home's art strike from 1990 to 1993. More recently, in 2017, on the day that Donald Trump was inaugurated as president in the United States, the J20 Art Strike demanded the closure of museums, galleries and art schools in a conscious echo of the Artists' Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression and War. The contemporary art collective Claire Fontaine has theorised the human strike, which they claim is not reserved for the proletariat or working conditions, but takes aim at life more broadly. The collective goes so far as to suggest that the generalisation of a situation in which work and life are indistinguishable means that the strike must even be turned inwards upon the striking subject itself.¹³

In its broadest sense the refusal of work is a concept and a practice that has the capacity to unite workers, insofar as it offers the opportunity to gain better working conditions and pursue experiences of creativity and pleasure that are outside of the economic sphere of production.¹⁴ It plays a key role in advancing the struggle of workers, underpinned by a desire to reduce and if possible dispense with the influence of work over social life.¹⁵ While art strikes may fail to disrupt the art industry, Stewart Home once argued that their importance is not their feasibility but the way that they expand the terrain of struggle.¹⁶ In Carpenter's case by working collaboratively on the exhibition's conceptualisation and yet presenting objects that he did not make, that are of little aesthetic merit, that display repetition which we tend to understand as boring objects that therefore confound or disappoint the viewer — *Room Based* demonstrates a consideration of both the affective and relational dynamics of refusal that moves beyond individualised notions of dropping out. One might argue that in this context the stakes of an art strike for Carpenter are low, but as I have suggested above the refusal of work is, paradoxically, an ongoing feature of his practice.

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Applin, Lee Lozano:
Not Working, 136.

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Mikkel Krause Frantzen,
"Shooting the Ambulance? Debt, Depression
and the Human Strike
in the Art of Claire
Fontaine," *Third Text*
34, no. 3 (2020):
393–414, 409, DOI:
10.1080/09528822.
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15
Stephen Shukaitis,
"Learning Not to
Labor," *Rethinking
Marxism* 26, no. 2
(2014): 195, DOI:
10.1080/08935696.
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Shukaitis, "Learning
Not to Labor," 201.

14
Dave Beech, *Art and
Postcapitalism: Aesthetic
Labour, Automation
and Value Production*
(London: Pluto Press,
2019), 53.