

# Open Letter to Labor Servicing the Culture Industry



I've worked as an art handler in New York, both as a freelancer and on the payroll with benefits. The two modes of handling art both share the constant threat of losing one's job if any mistakes are made or if any hesitation to accommodate what is requested—or more often expected—is revealed. Freelancing is less and more stressful. Freelancing allows for a lifestyle where literally 10–14 hour days (like many others, I've done 16ers, some overnights) can be packed into a week during an exhibition change, with weeks off to “focus on one's own work.” Constantly flirting with poverty, as most freelancers are, a seemingly large chunk of money is obtained that vanishes rather quickly after coping with the realities of New York rent. A pattern emerges after freelancing for a while where the free time is often spent worrying and networking for the next job. Cultures develop over a period of time amongst crews. They get to know each other and the people who staff the gallery full time, but when the gig is over, so is the connection to the gallery or the museum. God forbid a freelancer come down with the flu or something worse; if you don't work, you don't get paid. The freelancer also has to be always accommodating and ready to work when the phone rings. If not, the phone may not ring again. Freelancers are constantly juggling the phone ringing too much, overbooking and having to say no; or more often, the phone doesn't ring enough. Freelancers expend a lot of time and energy (labor) in a constant hustle when they are not presently working. A certain degree of satisfaction and camaraderie can come from working on a crew to pull off an insanely large installation under pressure in a short period of time, but at the end of the day, in spite of his/her specialized skill, in spite of the fact that most hold MFAs (that they've taken on a lifetime of debt for), the freelance art handler is the lowest rung on the ladder of the art world, barely worthy of eye contact.

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The next lowest rung is probably the gallery attendant, or rather, the receptionist at the front desk. They have the thankless tasks of answering phones, sitting at the front desk, on display themselves, dealing with the public all day, tolerating lechy tailored old men wearing too much cologne, and taking whatever kind of abuse the director gives them for whatever reason he or she feels a whim to dole out. In all of the galleries I've worked for and most I visit, women usually hold this job. Obviously, I can't speak from experience but only by what I've observed. Leaving Chelsea one night this past February, I overheard a conversation between two receptionists from a gallery on my street sharing a smoke. One woman was talking about how a friend of hers had to quit another gallery without giving notice because she couldn't deal with the abuse she was getting, and how she was under constant scrutiny about how she was dressed. The other woman said, “Yeah, it's usually not like that here, but sometimes it is. I'm really not looking forward to the Armory.” I can't count

how many times I've heard some version of that conversation in New York. Both of these women, like most I'm aware of who work reception in New York galleries, were attractive and dressed very well. Most likely at about 17.9% APR. I've rarely worked more than a few weeks in a gallery without seeing a receptionist brought to tears by the abuse of a director. Many of these receptionists hold Master's degrees in art history. They tend to make salaries in the mid 30's with dental and health benefits. They are all one forgotten phone message or bad outfit away from getting on someone's last nerve and either having their shitty job become a total living hell or simply taken away.

Debatable for that same low spot on the ladder as the receptionist, is the full-time art handler. The full-time art handler actually has quite a lot of administrative responsibility as well as the physical tasks of hanging and installing art, patching and painting walls, changing light bulbs and tubes, trouble shooting electronic equipment, emptying trash, sweeping the floor, and cleaning trash from the front of the gallery in the morning. The art handler also has to manage the crates. They have to be opened and have their contents inspected. Theoretically, if a damaged work is received from a truck and the driver has left before the crate has been

opened and inspected, the art handler is responsible for the damage.

The contents of the crates, the art works, have to be entered into the database, and the status of the works—sold, on site, or in storage—has to be accurately maintained. The lines between registrar and art handler get blurred with these tasks. In most large galleries, there

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are viewing rooms where installations and hangings have to be made at very short notice when a director arranges a meeting with a collector to view something from the inventory. It's all quite high pressure, and when the pressure dies down, there are plenty of menial janitorial tasks to make sure no one should become idle. Full-time art handlers also usually have MFAs. They tend to make in the mid 30's to low 40's with health and dental benefits. They're all a misplaced crate, a damaged work, a dead light bulb, or a dealer's forgetting to take his Welbutrin for a few days away from being fired.

There are also warehouses and museums, which depend on such workers to carry out their business. Some museums are—or at least they have been—mindful to hire more equal amounts of men and women to conduct the exhibition changes. Breaks and lunches are scheduled at a consistent time. Overtime is presented as an option to take, but there are no benefits. I've worked with guys who have done this long enough to go grey; some have limps or other ailments. The skills they have are a very specialized form of labor developed over a significant period of time. They've built a career out of working show change to show change. There is no 401k or any

other type of safety net waiting for these folks. And what about the receptionist? How long can she go on sitting behind the desk? It seems she either finds some way to move up to an assistant director position, or she goes back to school or back to wherever she came from.

And then there are the TAs and the adjuncts. Earning more “cultural capital” within the realm of the arts than those working in the institutions of exhibition and sale but obscenely lower wages. I was a TA in an Ivy League institution and made 9 bucks an hour. I got very lucky and landed a year-long visiting assistant professor gig at a private university right out of school for an academic year and earned just over 5 grand a semester. I taught in a really fantastic sculpture program at a state university and earned under \$1,900 dollars for each semester. While I was teaching, I would juggle freelance work to survive. I also would make a point to stay late on days of my classes to make time for every student. I would conduct independent study courses with some, primarily out of my love for the work but also in an attempt to gain more experience to better position myself for the elusive tenure-track job. I do have a few colleagues who have somehow managed to secure a tenure-track position complete with benefits, but most who continue to adjunct are constantly hustling, juggling other jobs, and constantly looking beyond the semester they are working in, trying to sniff out the next job and vying for it against enormous competition.

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In art school, primarily during the course of my undergraduate work, I got two messages regarding the professional life outside of school. One was a Romantic sort of ideal about staying focused on my work. Just keep my head down, keep cranking it out, no matter what life hands me (in spite of financial need or the need for medical care), just keep working and I would find myself able to support myself autonomously. Basically I would learn how to shit gold. On the other hand, I was told I would probably be hungry a lot, that it would be difficult for a long, long time, that there are no teaching jobs (which is mostly true), and that I better develop some skills I could live on. Graduate school was presented as a must-do for an artist but also as the place where one would “figure it all out.” When I got to graduate school, I did make a lot of work at the time. Some of it I felt good about, but there was no guidance or real discussion as to how to survive once we got out. By the end of the first year, I was noticing a hyper-awareness as to who was getting “picked up” by which gallery and who was showing in what group show. While no one would admit it at the time (many of my friends have since fessed up to it), it created a greater sense of neurotic competition and anxiety. By the end of my second year of graduate school, expressions of disappointment over awards were being vocalized (along with sentiments bordering on despair) of not knowing what to do to

survive and still have the time and means to focus on one's work. It was around this time that I became aware of and started participating in attempting to organize for GESO (Graduate Employees and Student Organization), which aimed to organize all of the graduate students of the university and secure a union contract. While there were strikes and walkouts, the union was ultimately, narrowly voted down and did not secure a contract for graduate student/employees to be able to bargain collectively for better pay, benefits and a real position, as it was the graduate students who were taking on the largest teaching loads, outside of the school of art. I started imagining what a labor union in the art world, and greater culture industry might look like (as it does in the film, television, and theater industries) as I was being organized and attempting to organize other students around the vision of what a university with unionized graduate employees might look like.

I left school and came to New York—along with pretty much everyone else from my program and every other MFA program on the east coast—and hunkered down to figure out how to survive. The thought of a union for artists and/or art workers quickly faded. When I would score jobs, I would just feel grateful to be working (no matter how insane or abusive the person or organization I was working for) at a rate of 15 to 20 bucks an hour. The people I worked next to were all in the same boat I was. I landed what I thought was a nice job as a gallery attendant/security guard for a small private collection. Three days a week, 24 dollars an hour. At first it was great; no one ever came in, allowing me plenty of time for reading, writing, and working in my sketchbook. After about six months of no one coming in, the managing director decided it would be a good idea for us to start cleaning and moving books and boxes around in the basement storage, just to keep us busy. I missed being able to read, but I didn't mind pushing a broom around or scrubbing elevator doors because the pay seemed good and it was only three days a week. The menial tasks became more frequent, and the director grew more and more erratic, condescending, and manipulative. I felt hooked on the job because, while it was deadly boring—as was the collection—and the managing director was becoming a full-blown psychotic, I was just getting by on three days a week. My co-workers were all a decade or so older than I, and they had been in New York for a long time. There was always shared bitching between us about how boring the job was or what an unjust prick the director had become (he'd taken to reminding each and everyone of us we'd be fired if mistakes were made), but my coworkers kept repeating that there were very few opportunities this good for artists, and most places were "so much worse" (which I'd found to be at least partly true). There were two people I worked with whom I liked and learned from a lot; one got out after just over a year, the other ended up

sticking around another three after my three years. There was, after all no better job for an artist in New York.

And the truth is, when I would talk to my other peers about what I did for my rent money, it was often met with a reaction of jealousy. “Dude, you should never quit that job!” While it was true that the hourly wage was close to double what some people I knew were making, when I would talk about the job over beers or whatever with friends, I wouldn’t talk about the parts where I was scrubbing a freight elevator door that was never used. I never talked about how I didn’t have health insurance, and how one trip to the ER put me in more serious debt. I wouldn’t talk about having to sweep up condoms in front of the building in the morning or washing the windows, and I never talked about what a moody, constantly insulting prick I was taking orders from. The prick that held my ability to pay rent over my head. He made the half-joke of “You’ll get fired” all the time. In spite of my being able to make rent in only three days a week, I was still scrambling all the time. I had a studio but rarely had the money to make the work I wanted to, so I still had to hustle for freelance work to get my own work done. In 2006, an opportunity to do a residency and teach in Europe for a few months came up, and I took it. While there, I was treated well financially speaking, but I also was treated with basic respect that I had not found since trying to make a living in New York. That gave me some perspective.

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Just looking at auction results alone will tell you there is an enormous amount of money that moves in the art world. The figures have nearly recovered from the recent crash, and the fairs are churning along at a robust pace. In spite of those large amounts of money that do move around, it takes most artists years to get access to it through their own work. Very few get to a point in their lives where they are able to fully support their lives with their own work, and most have to augment their practice through a series of jobs, flexible skills, and schedules. The adjunct jobs are hard to get, and when they are obtained, there’s never enough money with them to live on. The tenure-track job is quite rare, and usually parallels the development of one’s own work. An artist is usually supporting him/herself with their own work, and that contributes a great deal to what makes an artist eligible for a tenure-track job. Most artists and most art scholars usually have to spend some years in the industry that services the art world—that of the art handler, the receptionist, the crater, the warehouse worker, or the adjunct. Some stay there. Though most who take these jobs are very educated, at least with master’s degrees, there is an expectation that the jobs are temporary. The artist or scholar believes that he or she is in a transition and won’t be at the job or in the state of needing a job for very long. Generations of artists and scholars coming to New York and other cities in

droves with the same belief has set up an ideal situation for gallerists, warehouses, and academic art and art history departments who need labor but don't want to invest in it like businesses in other industries do. They know there are plenty of smart, skilled workers here and plenty more coming right behind them. The reality of needing a job for most artists is not something they are inherently proud of. Artists in need of a job are on their own. As it stands right now, the collective trait amongst artists and scholars in the industry which services the art world is a shared low self-esteem with regards to what work is done to survive.

No one who has developed a career out of being an art handler or a receptionist sought out to do that. It just sort of happens. Whether or not someone is just passing through those jobs on to the next thing or they sprout roots into those jobs, there is no reason the conditions of those jobs should not be much better than they are. Much better meaning a basic standard of respect, in the form of rules against abuse. Better in the form of decent wages, and overtime presented as an option with the guarantee of increased compensation. And better in the form of healthcare, vacation time, and some sort of pension.

These improved conditions don't and won't just suddenly happen. They need to be fought for and secured through the formation of a union.

**6** It's high time art-workers—especially art handlers and receptionists—unionized. It seems there is currently an attempt by TAs and adjuncts to unionize which comes and goes, but a lot more consistent, even militant, effort should be put into that, as well. Art workers are among the few remaining sources of educated indentured servants in America. But you're renting your labor; they don't own you. You should be treated with respect. The abuse you—many of you with advanced degrees—endure is considered “paying your dues.” That bullshit comes out of the collective low self-esteem for the work you do that allows things to keep moving in and out the door—the work that, if it were suddenly halted, would bring everything to a stop. Galleries could not operate without their administrators and laborers. Some recognize this, but most don't. They need to be reminded. I've felt the fear of needing to endure the shit in order to survive and I know it's not easy to make happen, but having a union-secured contract protects against the requirement for long hours, verbal and other forms of abuse, being fired without proven just cause, and benefits for those who don't get them.

Galleries seem to think that their administrative staff and art handlers are insignificant and easily replaced. This is largely because it's true. Art workers have no structure in place to protect themselves. Unionizing art-workers and adjuncts seems almost impossible. It's a steep enough hill that it's constantly tempting to revert to

apathy and cynicism before we even start. It's important to keep in mind that the notion of a 40 hour week, weekends, health and dental benefits, elimination of child labor, women's rights, the establishment of auto workers unions, garment-workers unions, plumbers unions, carpenters unions, all looked like impossible hills to climb as well.

Why is working in the realms of "culture" and academia so undervalued? Not only by the institutions that hire, but also by the good, committed workers themselves who will step on each other for the next available job? It's equally worth organizing adjuncts as it is art-workers. The work doesn't get done without us. Some institutions know this and act on it. When workers in any field collectivize and strategize to confront management, management listens and attempts to compromise. This is just the first step, that often rewards it's participants with euphoria. It gets more difficult after that, but a necessary step to make. It is worthwhile to at least imagine what labor unions for art workers and adjuncts might look like. It's worthwhile to imagine how good things could possibly be, as there are more than enough examples to point to as examples of what is bad.

What if there was a union for gallery receptionists? Perhaps if there were a dress code, it would be made explicit in a contract and not enforced through passive aggressive cues and insults. There could be a budget for the clothes the gallery wanted its receptionists to dress in. Terms of what was expected from the receptionists would be made explicit, and they wouldn't be expected to anticipate what was needed to be done. What if, instead of hiring whomever for an exhibition change, a gallery had to contact the union for a team of men and women to execute that change under specified terms that included the scope of the work, how many hours would be expected per shift, what the terms of (optional) overtime would be, while these freelancers enjoyed benefits? Adjuncts and TAs who carry out most of the university's work of teaching undergraduates would be able to negotiate class sizes, compensation, health benefits, as well as time and space for research.

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Since I have been working in the art world, the subject of an art workers union very rarely comes up, and when it does, it's usually in the form of a joke, like "Can we take a union break?" or it's met with utter ridicule. The difficulty, even perhaps improbability, of forming a union is perceived as impossibility, and a silly delusion. Everyone needs the job they have. Everyone had to hustle and struggle to get it, and they're all aware of how many people are hustling and struggling, waiting to move into their spot. A union will not come about in a form of being granted to art workers. It will have to be developed, as will the solidarity amongst those who are doing



the work. There is the Freelancers Union, which has nice ads on the subway, but no one I've ever worked with in the art world has been a member. They have an interesting website, and appear to be an organization with mostly potential at the moment. That is one model in tact, which can be looked to and built upon, but perhaps another organization can be formed specifically for art workers. Just imagine if everyone who serviced the art world organized and suddenly and abruptly refused to work in the days leading up to Miami. What if everyone refused to move crates, refused to show up and answer phones, hang work, and patch and paint walls? It's really worthwhile to consider what that might look like, what solidarity required to make such a strike a serious one, and how you would ensure your own protection and that of your fellow worker. The skills you have, which they depend on in a very real way, become a powerful weapon when they are withheld, or threatened to be withheld, collectively, in solidarity.

It's definitely easier to remain disengaged, keep your head down, and bide your time. The truth is, you're juggling these jobs in order to get to your own work. It is your own work, after all, that is going to allow you to produce yourself and al-

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low you to make the kind of life you want for yourself. Or maybe it won't. And what if it doesn't? How long can you keep scraping by as an adjunct having to hustle other jobs to make rent and get to your own work? How long can you keep humping crates off of a back of a truck? How long can you sit on display at a desk answering phones?

Just in case it doesn't work out, are you going to take on another \$40,000 in debt for another degree?

We all run the risk of mortifying ourselves discussing such matters; I think I'm running that risk here, now. I don't know where to begin, apart from starting a conversation. I just think the desires many of us share for some sense of being our own masters are very well understood, exploited and taken advantage of. I sense that most of us realize this but just don't want to say anything about it. I think our refusal to say anything about it, our refusal to organize and do anything about it is actually quite conservative—a survival reflex in response to the equally conservative impulses of a corporate ethos which adheres to the fluctuations of the market. I'm just finding this to be tiresome, and I hope if you do also, you'll start talking about it more, thinking about what might be done to make it better, thinking about what “better” might look like, imagining how good things could possibly become real.

—written by a member of *arts & labor #ows*