

*Without Rhyme or Reason*

Meaningless work is potentially the most abstract, concrete, individual, foolish, indeterminate, exactly determined, varied, important art-action-experience one can undertake today.  
Walter de Maria, *Meaningless Work*, 1960

There are certain actions that could indeed be conceived of as meaningless work. For artist Walter de Maria these include the transfer of objects from one box to another and back again, back and forth, back and forth, or maybe the act of digging a hole and then covering it up again with the same soil, back and forth ... and so on.<sup>i</sup> For de Maria the repetitive events of a burgeoning administrative culture offered innumerable templates that could be appropriated and redeployed within the context of an art practice, once emptied of their original purpose, deliberately rendered unproductive. The gesture of filing letters in a filing cabinet, he argued, certainly had the *potential* to be truly meaningless but only if it remained an open act, *only if* the person performing the action were *not* a secretary, furthermore if some attempt were made to periodically scatter the papers willy-nilly on the floor. The secret to performing meaningless work it would seem then is not to do with the action itself, but gauged rather by the resulting lack of accomplishment, the sense of never getting anyway or of failing to identify – let alone reach – the desired goal. It is July 31st 2010. A woman clocks in for work at 9.00am, smartly dressed in black, hair worn back. She begins the task of arranging fifty chairs, slowly, methodically, in what initially seems like the rather utilitarian preparations for some unspecified institutional event. Gradually she positions the chairs into neat formation – a regimented grid – before appearing to change her mind. The seating arrangement is disassembled and regrouped into a single long line, evenly spaced. Yet, before long this too is abandoned, seemingly deemed unfit for purpose, somehow not quite up to the job. The deliberation continues. New options are tested and rejected – over and over, again and again.

At first glance perhaps, it could be possible to conceive of this lone individual as a diligent host, akin to the wedding planner intent on finding the perfect model of seating for accommodating the capricious whims of their nuptial guests. Or else, at times, she seems more like an over-zealous conference organizer maximizing the possibility of delegate interactions, willfully breaking up the order of the group circle into intimate network hubs for optimal coffee-break dialogue. On occasion, her actions evoke those of the novice teacher, undecided how best to organize her class; uncertain where to place the chairs to keep the space dynamic, deliberately stalling from falling too quickly into line. Every option is pitted with as many concerns as merits. A herring-bone row serves only the traditional talk-and-chalk; informal clusters invariably reinforce the striation of existing friendship groups; lecture theatre lines privilege efficiency of transmission over the close proximity of a one-to-one; a student's glance is often angled, tangential, forced sideways by the diagonal seating arrangement of a *V* or the curve of a *U*. Every solution, it seems, harbors a new problem needing to be solved. At first glance then, the woman's gestures of assembly and disassembly might appear to have some utility, performed as part of the process of *making ready*, as preparation for some future-possible event. Barely an hour in and the promise of utility appears questionable, a little suspect. At times, the arrangements appear determined, as though they were diagramming a specific scenario or had a

plan in mind. But in other moments, the organization of the chairs becomes frustrated or distracted, sent off course – a touch *wild*. In the absence of any named occasion to plan for, the seating configurations remain wholly speculative, hypothetical, abstracted. After two hours, there is still no prospect of resolution in sight, each reconfiguration of chairs seems to thwart the logic of the previous permutation, refusing to allow the possibility of any narrative to emerge. The ebb and flow of action is maintained over the next eight hours – the duration of a typical working day – until 5.00pm, the time for quickly downing tools and clocking off. Nothing has been achieved, no conclusions have been gleaned, no resolution granted. Throughout the day, the unfolding event remains suspended at the level of the preliminary; the anticipated guests never arrive, their presence can only be (barely) imagined. Over time, the intent or purpose with which this task is performed appears increasingly foolhardy or misplaced, for the arrangement of the chairs lacks any sense of utilitarian purpose or design, any definitive function. Each configuration is disbanded before any chance of inhabitation, collapsed almost as soon as it is proposed. The different arrangements operate as propositions for potential and yet unfulfilled relational interactions – imagined meetings or fictional gatherings – that are barely asserted before they become reconceived according to a different plan. These are disposable structures, sketches; never intended for actual use. The task of assembling chairs is *not* preparatory; rather this is *it*.

The various configurations evoke the possibilities of communication, however, the location of the action itself collapses all hope of functionality or utility, for the chairs are arranged in the shallow waters of the Los Angeles River, just under Fletcher Bridge in Elysian Valley. This is not a place wherein a briefing meeting might take shape, nor an exam or time-share seminar. It is not the place for a congregation; a reception; the patient formation of a seated queue; the first confessional of a self-help group; the gathered reunion of the class of '74; a game of bingo; job interview or speed-date. But then again, neither was the large pool of water fronting the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in Berlin, where the same female protagonist (who is, in fact, Croatian artist Vlatka Horvat) performed a similar day's work in 2007. In this context, Horvat's arrangement of the chairs at first signaled towards the possibility of exchange and dialogue, echoing the original aspirations of the institutional frame within which her performance was situated. The House of World Cultures was conceived in the 1950s as a meeting place for and between different cultures, a proposition that like all utopian visions existed better as a blueprint, without the interference of human inhabitation. Mirroring the failure of the institution, each hopeful configuration of chairs is inevitably abandoned, never inhabited. Dialogue is only ever intimated towards, never actualized. The propositions never attain stability, but rather their structure appears somewhat liquid, precarious. Even on dry land, there remains a certain absurdity to the interminable rearrangement of these chairs. Performed in 2009 at the site of the former Zollverein coal mine in Essen (produced by PACT Zollverein), the work appeared no less indeterminate, no less fluid. On this occasion, the chairs themselves seemed curiously animate, almost anthropomorphized; where Horvat's attempt to organize them appeared like the plight of the military commander disciplining the direction of her wayward troops. The configurations seemed at times like drills or a parade, where the chairs were coaxed to momentary attention, before falling out again at ease.

The work – an uninterrupted eight-hour performance that operates collectively under the title *This Here and That There* – is undeniably shaped by the specificity of its context; as much by the physical restrictions and constraints established by the site itself, as by the conceptual and historical associations that inevitably gather around any site-specific practice. This latest iteration of the project in the Los Angeles River was commissioned by Outpost for Contemporary Art, an art organization based in LA, concerned with blurring the boundaries between art, social practice and public life. The work can be seen to extend Horvat’s concerns around the relationship between body and site, exploring how an individual negotiates the specific terms of occupation and inhabitation within situations or spaces that appear limited or framed by absurd rules. Horvat’s work often takes the form of an attempt to find imaginative solutions within the terms of an illogical – curiously self-imposed – system or structure. She engages in endless actions; irresolvable quests, repeated tasks that are inevitably doomed to fail or that are recursively performed. Her work often plays out according to a model of purposeless reiteration, through a form of non-teleological performativity, or in relentless obligation to a rule or order that seems absurd, arbitrary or somehow undeclared. Seen in these terms, Horvat’s endeavour within the project *This Here and That There* might be conceived as *Sisyphean*, where the perpetual assembly and disassembly of the chairs evokes the plight of Sisyphus, locked forever into the action of rolling a rock to the top of a hill, only for it to then roll back down again. Though the term *Sisyphean* is often used to describe a sense of indeterminable or purposeless labour, it actually refers to a tripartite structure whereby a task is performed in response to a particular rule or requirement, fails to reach its proposed goal and is then repeated. More than a model of endless or uninterrupted continuation of action, a Sisyphean practice operates according to a cycle of failure and repetition, of non-attainment and replay; it is a punctuated performance. A rule is drawn. An action is required. An attempt is made. Over and over, again and again – a task is set, the task fails, and the task is repeated. *Ad infinitum*

According to Christy Lange in her essay *Bound to Fail*, the engagement of artists such as Walter de Maria in relentlessly repetitive – even Sisyphean – action, serves “no purpose other than to exhaust the person performing it. He will eventually have to stop, and therefore fail to complete his task.”<sup>ii</sup> The practice becomes one of maintaining the meaninglessness of the task at hand, which is no mean feat. As de Maria warned, “Caution should be taken that the work chosen should not be too pleasurable, lest pleasure becomes the purpose of the work.”<sup>iii</sup> For other commentators of the period, meaningless work did not lack purpose as such only purpose of a teleological kind – it had no goal. Its purpose then was perhaps more lateral, for by determinedly engaging in boring, repetitive action it might be possible to attain a curious state of immersion, where one’s sense of self is collapsed, dissolved into space, no longer distinguishable from the performance of the task. By working through ordinary boredom it is suggested, it could be possible to attain a state of *super boredom*, the experience of total *presentness*.<sup>iv</sup> Certainly, there are moments of boredom and restlessness within Horvat’s performance, however her labour seems more one of striving to find new solutions or permutations to her *problem*, to find ways of exhausting the system rather than it exhausting her. Whilst the rule serves to delimit or determine certain actions, it also functions for Horvat as a point of creative pressure or leverage against which to work. The failure of each repeated attempt to find the ‘right’ configuration of seating operates as the momentum for the work, the impetus for the development of *new* permutations and solutions to the task at hand.

Politically speaking, this *opening out* of possibilities within a limited frame becomes a way of creating the potential for alternative modes of existence within situations that had been perceived as inflexible or irrevocably constant. The authority of the rule collapses in the wake of a performer who – like Sisyphus – refuses to buckle under its pressure, or who persistently endeavours to find new ways of creatively inhabiting the instruction through the performance of unlimited repetitions within its limited terms.

In Horvat's work, the myth of Sisyphus is conjured through the economic or diagrammatic vernacular of the instruction manual or informational guide, where its failure and repetition become explored as playfully propositional as much as existential conditions of lived experience. The performed task is staged as a conceptual *game*, however, inevitably – as a body performs within a system – the “demonstration (of an idea) at some point becomes more real”.<sup>v</sup> The critical inconsistencies produced by the artist appearing to move between different positions – between seriousness and levity, investment and disinvestment, humour and despair – complicates any single reading of the Sisyphean tendency. Interpretation remains multifaceted and shifting, never fixed. Horvat's makeshift *non*-performances refuse to either achieve their desired end or offer the transcendental possibilities promised through ‘eternally returning’ action. The irresolution produced by the punctuated cycle of Sisyphean failure and repetition in the work prevents a sense of the inevitable disappointment experienced in the moment of completion. Closure is deferred in favour of “a sense of waiting for something to happen” where according to Horvat the condition of indecision or dissatisfaction points to, “an experience that is never about ‘now’. It is about some point ‘later’, some thing not-yet-here, not yet visible or known”.<sup>vi</sup> Her actions remain forever suspended at the point of anticipation, at the threshold of what is still *yet-to-come*. To lack definitive purpose is to refuse to behave according to dominant teleological or goal-oriented expectations, to remain unmotivated and without clear aim. Purposelessness is activity liberated from its servitude; or else the expectant state of promise or potentiality before purpose has been fully declared, before a use or function has been defined.

During Horvat's performance, the identifiable configurations of chairs offer moments of fleeting stability, which merely punctuate or interrupt the longer episodes of formlessness or of unruly, vertiginous disorder. The process of repetition inevitably confuses or breaks down the rhythm or logic within the activity, enabling the possibility for moments of irresolution to become fore-grounded or privileged. Within this disrupted, deconstructed or even inverted syntax of the performance, the task might become one of trying to produce an authentic experience of *inbetweenness* or even liminality. For Horvat, “the event proper, for which this activity is presumably but a preparation, is always absent or does not take place, so the act of getting ready, of ‘setting the stage’ becomes the event”.<sup>vii</sup> Repeatedly, Horvat arranges the chairs only to then begin another configuration or permutation, seemingly uncertain about how to resolve her appointed task. Alternatively, each proposition is deliberately sabotaged and the *failure* of the task becomes a way of postponing resolution, a tactic for avoiding definitive declarations or decisions that could then disable the potentiality of the situation. In this sense, Sisyphean labour becomes generative, where repetition always produces something new or different, the possibility of endlessly playful and mobile reinvention. For cultural theorist Roger Caillois, infinitely repeatable – yet also potentially open-ended – action operates at the heart of play for, “the possibilities of ludus are almost infinite ... what to begin with seems

to be a situation susceptible to indefinite repetition turns out to be capable of producing ever-new combinations”.<sup>viii</sup> Horvat’s prolonged endeavour of arranging chairs in the LA River might then be considered as a form of ludic investigation or play, where the work operates as an open space of potentiality where closure is traded in favour of endlessly unfolding permutations.

Emma Cocker, 2010

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- i See Walter de Maria, ‘Meaningless Work’ (1960), published in La Monte Young, (ed.) *An Anthology of Chance Operations*, (La Monte Young & Jackson Mac Low, 1963), p.28
- ii Christy Lange, ‘Bound to Fail’, in *Tate ETC*, Issue 4 / Summer 2005, accessed at <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue4/boundtofail.htm> on 25.08.10
- iii De Maria, ‘Meaningless Work’ (1960)
- iv See for example, Dick Higgins, ‘Boredom and Danger’, *Source* No. 5 (January 1969)
- v Vlatka Horvat, Unpublished conversations with artist, 2007-2008
- vi Horvat, 2007-8
- vii Horvat, 2007-8
- viii Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, (University of Illinois Press, 1958 / 2001), p.31