

Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts 2021, Virtual Festival, Toronto

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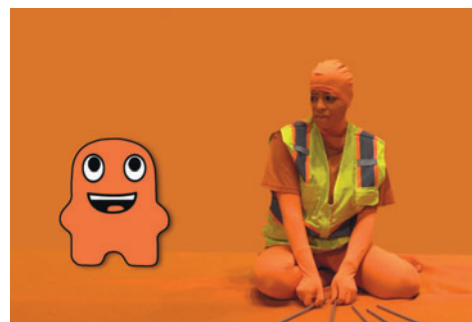
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Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts 2021

Artists began participating in the gig economy long before the term was coined in the late 2000s. Precarious work seems to be part and parcel of the artist's cultural cachet. Whether sessional teaching or performing menial part-time jobs, the artist—and increasingly the cultural worker—is no stranger to the side-hustle. When viewing some of the work in this year's Mayworks Festival, I wondered if the “starving artist” inspired its conception in 1985. Since those early days, Mayworks has underscored linkages between artists and labourers, particularly their parallel histories of activism and collective organizing. These shared histories are increasingly significant as we navigate the interminable end of the pandemic and the commensurate social and economic displacements affecting the underemployed, the low-waged, and the so-called essential worker.

Founded by the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, the festival is supported by several arts councils and labour unions and is mandated to present work by artists who are both workers and activists. Despite complications posed by the pandemic, the festival organizers pulled off an impressive variety of projects ranging from short essays on museum labour (Brooke Downey), DJ sets (DJ Heebiejabi), feminist choir performances (Choeur Maha), in-situ and online exhibitions (*Latin@merica: Embedding Bodies and Localities*), video works (Hiba Ali, En Lai Mah), community-based projects (Tea Base), feature-length film screenings (*Sorry We Missed You*, 2019; *9to5: The Story of a Movement*, 2020), and several Zoom-based talks to unpack each of these presentations. In “e-tending” a number of these projects, I discovered an overarching theme around art and the gig economy as it relates to extractive industries, sometimes viewing labour itself as a form of resource extraction from the body.

Sustaining community, particularly as done by women, was proposed as a possible antidote to extractive processes

in several projects. A prime example of this is the screenplay-in-progress titled *The Words We Can't Speak* by writer and filmmaker Lindsay McIntyre, which was presented as a table read by an all-Indigenous cast. The story follows a young Inuit translator based on McIntyre's grandmother, and demonstrates the complex transition from traditional ways of life in the North to state-sponsored forms of indentured labour (the screenplay alludes to how rather than being paid in Canadian dollars the Inuit people were given tokens that could be exchanged for goods). The work, while focusing on the unimaginable hardships experienced by the protagonist, demonstrates the move from the extraction of land resources to the extraction of Indigenous labour as part of a deliberate campaign to assimilate the North. The emotional labour of women is brought to the forefront in McIntyre's piece, as it was in Kathy Kennedy's *La marée des jours* (2009–21) performed by Choeur Maha, a feminist choir based in Montréal. The choir's ode to the repetitive daily tasks of pandemic life was performed on Zoom, with each member singing their own chorus of everyday chores, while finding solidarity and comradery in their performance.

Performance itself, as a practice of resistance, was demonstrated in En Lai Mah's *Money Moves: 超时工作* (2019), a video that choreographs the day-to-day work of a grocery store employee, Mr. Bao. We learn about Mr. Bao's fight for fair compensation for repetitive work-related injuries as the artist guides him through a poetic interpretation of the physical elements of his job using the medium of martial arts. Speaking to his experience as an immigrant labourer, Mr. Bao's movements—becoming an art unto themselves—reveal the emotional toll of the physical labour he performs to make food affordable and accessible to Canadian consumers. Mah presents us with a novel way to visibilize how truly essential this undervalued labour is, while revealing

En Lai Mah

Money Moves: 超时工作, video still, 2019.

Photo : courtesy of Mayworks Festival

Hiba Ali

Abra, video still, 2018.

Photo : courtesy of Mayworks Festival

Maggie Flynn

In the Water, 2021.

Photo : courtesy of Mayworks Festival



how it is extracted through wage theft. On the opposite end of the wage spectrum, Maggie Flynn's research-performance project *In the Water* (2021) gives voice to the Canadian cultural sector's deep ties to extractive industries. Reading like the CV from hell, Flynn lists the names of board members serving in some of Canada's largest museums who also hold executive level positions in the mining and resources sector. Each board member's name is followed by information about their generous contributions to public art institutions and their troubling corporate records of toxic waste management, poor workplace safety standards, blatant disregard for treaty rights, etc. Mah and Flynn both use performance to create spaces for contemplating what is being extracted in order to meet our demands as consumers of goods and cultural products.

Hiba Ali's video *Abra* (2018) also looks at how consumer habits impact labour. Using the same cheeky approach as Amazon's orange mascot "Peccy," the video exposes the coercive anti-collectivist rhetoric of the distribution giant. An Amazon employee (played by Ali) paints their face orange to blend into the background at the behest of the squishy blob, both embodying the company's brand and becoming the object of its surveillance. To unpack this work, cultural workers and activists—some of whom had worked in various capacities for Amazon—came together for an online discussion about recent efforts by workers to unionize, and the different kinds of support that artists and cultural workers can offer. The consensus was that gig work was becoming a primary source of income for workers across various industries, and the issues of precarious labour in the arts should be recognized as being tied to broader struggles such as those faced by Amazon employees.

As a counterpoint to extraction, the Toronto collective Tea Base presented a digital exhibition titled *unpruned*

tomato vines that explored the Chinatown Anti-Displacement Garden as fertile ground for artistic production. Tea Base has been tending the garden in Chinatown Centre's courtyard with other community groups for the past three years. As part of the exhibition, multidisciplinary artist Hannia Chang's video *the futures of space* (2021) mashes together low-res footage of the collective's time spent in the area working on projects and generally hanging around, overlaid with a poetic manifesto by Chang that grapples with the (im)possibilities of community. Theirs is a labour focused on nourishment instead of extraction. And as if to sum up the thesis of this year's festival, they remark that "my liberation exists hand-in-hand with yours."

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