

# C A B

CONTEMPORARY ART

THE WORKS



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Artists in and from Chicago

## Artists

Marissa Lee Benedict & David Rueter, Zachary Cahill, Theaster Gates, Michelle Grabner,  
Tony Lewis, Matthew Metzger, Geof Oppenheimer, Dan Peterman, William Pope.L

## Curators

Dieter Roelstraete and Abigail Winograd  
in collaboration with Eléonore de Sadeleer

## THE WORKS: Artists in and from Chicago

By Dieter Roelstraete and Abigail Winograd

In her post-war classic of humanist philosophy *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt—who, as a teacher at the University of Chicago for much of the 1960s, would go on to become a decisive influence on Chicago sociology and its telling emphasis on the world of work—famously distinguished between the following three realms or modes of human activity: labor, work and action, with labor firmly planted at the bottom of the moral and/or intellectual ladder and action nestled at the top. Arendt's categorization evidently had its philosophical precedents—she herself invokes the distinction made by John Locke between working hands and the laboring body, or the ancient Greek opposition, first formulated by Aristotle, of the *cheirotechnes* or craftsman (to which the German-Dutch notion of the *Handwerker* corresponds) to those who like “slaves and tame animals with their bodies minister to the necessities of life.” Interestingly enough, at some point in her treatise Arendt uses the paradigm of art and the symbolic figure of the artist to further clarify these distinctions: to her, it seems as if the artist “is the only “worker” left in a laboring society,” while “the inspired creation of artworks” is conceived as the very acme of the type of action that transcends mere productive activity—for “the immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought.” In both art making as a type of thinking, and in thinking about art as such, the tangled knot of labor, work and action is symbolically tightened.

It is all rather telling, we believe, that these thoughts were first tested and tried, in some measure, in the city of Chicago, which is the partial subject of this exhibition, aptly titled “The Works”—a small survey show of artists “working” (laboring, active) in Chicago. For this is the city, after all, that is celebrated in Carl Sandburg's famous eponymous poem as “hog butcher for the world, tool maker, stacker of wheat, player with railroads and the nation's freight handler; stormy, husky, brawling, city of the Big Shoulders”—the historical capital of America's blue-collar, working-class consciousness. Sandburg, a son of Swedish immigrants, staunch socialist, political organizer, newspaperman and poet, arrived in Chicago with his young family in 1912. It was in Chicago that the poet found his voice by giving a voice to his adopted hometown in turn, his Chicago poem—first published by Poetry Magazine in 1914—accurately capturing the volatility, vibrant coarseness and energy of life (and work) in the booming industrial metropolis on the shores of Lake Michigan: a city built, not around dreams (like Los Angeles) or finance (like New York), but work—which, in Sandburg's words, “set [Chicago] vivid against the

little soft cities.” Another prominent chronicler of this particular cultural complex, Studs Terkel—son of Russian-Jewish immigrants and a devotee of Sandburg's—likewise found his voice in Chicago. Himself a transplant to the city, Terkel studied law at the University of Chicago but soon after chose to become a journalist. He spent decades interviewing the “common man”, transforming the practice of oral history in the process by capturing the texture of the American vernacular in such landmark publications as *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, which sealed his reputation as one of the foremost chroniclers of everyday laboring life. Like Sandburg, Terkel was part of a literary tradition stretching all the way from Theodore Dreiser to Richard Wright that sought to give voice to that most elusive of beings, the “man in the street”—always looking to make ends meet, always on the make. (Another famous literary portrait of Chicago, penned by Terkel's near-contemporary Nelson Algren, named it “city on the make”.) Chicago, birthplace of the skyscraper, of mail order retail, of the remote control, of the nuclear chain reaction, of neoliberal economics: no wonder it has so often been called “the city that works”—though the exact origin of that famous phrase continues to be clouded by mystery, one source for this moniker being a 1971 Newsweek feature on Mayor Daley's relatively smooth management of the Midwestern metropolis. No matter: in art as well as life, work continues to be a catalytic force for much of what goes on in the sprawling city on the lake.

The artworks gathered in this exhibition all—in some way or other, and/or in varying degrees of directness—address the issue of work that is so intimately interwoven with the mythological fabric of the city in which these artists live—and work. More than is the case in rivaling centers such as Los Angeles and New York, say—and this in itself is a character-defining distinction—art-making in Chicago often still equals effort and labor, and artists such as **Tony Lewis** and **William Pope.L** in particular are known for the performative lengths to which they will go to “produce” work. **Theaster Gates’** breakthrough solo show in Europe, organized at White Cube in London in the fall of 2012, was titled “*My Labor is My Protest*”, while **Michelle Grabner’s** recent survey show at the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art was titled “*I Work From Home*”; both are artists whose work far exceeds the conventional constraints of the production of art objects—they are the busy centers at the heart of a densely woven web of a wide range of activities instead. The projects of **Marissa Lee Benedict** (in collaboration with **David Rueter**) and **Dan Peterman** are strongly aligned with the genre-defying paradigm of social practice, which has deep roots in Chicago culture in particular (the very notion of social practice underlines the centrality of work to this particular idiom)—though their contribution to *The Works* operates in the register of ecological reflection first and foremost. **Matthew Metzger** and **Geof Oppenheimer** are the exhibition’s purest painter and sculptor respectively, their dedication to these disciplines strongly informed by the work ethic of daily practice and exercise—not for them the affected show of effortlessness that is such a hallmark of much contemporary explorations of painting and sculpture alike. In the idiosyncratic Midwestern spiritualism of **Zachary Cahill**, finally, the concept of work is recast along the sober lines of “good deeds”, resulting in a fitting homage to the power of art to act upon the world (i.e. how “art works”) in a variety of ways.

To conclude: In all nine contributions to *The Works*, “labor, work and action” comingle in varying degrees of intensity to produce a panoramic view of a city’s art scene where art-work very often means making things still—where the artist’s thinking remains a doing.

## CHICAGO

*Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:*

*They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under  
the gas lamps luring the farm boys.*

*And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill  
and go free to kill again.*

*And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have  
seen the marks of wanton hunger.*

*And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give  
them back the sneer and say to them:*

*Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse  
and strong and cunning.*

*Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set  
vivid against the little soft cities;*

*Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the  
wilderness,*

*Bareheaded,*

*Shoveling,*

*Wrecking,*

*Planning,*

*Building, breaking, rebuilding,*

*Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,*

*Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,*

*Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,*

*Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of  
the people,*

*Laughing!*

*Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be  
Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to  
the Nation.*

Carl Sandburg



## MARISSA LEE BENEDICT & DAVID RUETER

**Marissa Lee Benedict** and **David Rueter**'s film *Dark Fiber* investigates the sites, materials, and (very material) labor associated with the infrastructure of the telecommunications industry, bedrock of the supposedly immaterial knowledge economy—"dark fiber" is the term used to describe unused or "unlit" fiber optic cable. Employing an aesthetic reminiscent of avant-garde film and socially conscious video of the 1970s, the artists filmed themselves dressed as laborers, laying fiber optic cable across the United States, all the way from a beach in faraway San Diego to their hometown of Chicago. Benedict and Rueter's stoic travelogue reveals the physical infrastructure of the digital networks that undergird the virtual realities of contemporary life.

A native of Southern California, **Marissa Lee Benedict** is a sculptor, researcher, writer, explorer, teacher and avid amateur of many fields and disciplines. Benedict is currently based in Chicago, IL. She received a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 2007 and an MFA in 2011 from the Sculpture Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she currently teaches. She has shown most recently in Chicago at threewalls, the DePaul Art Museum, Chicago Artists' Coalition, Harold Washington College, Columbia College, Mana Contemporary, the Sullivan Galleries, and in New York at the Cue Art Foundation. She is currently an artist-in-residence and mentor for the BOLT Residency program of the Chicago Artists Coalition.

**David Allan Rueter** is a visual artist, programmer, and educator. His creative practice makes use of a range of new technologies—including custom software, custom electronics, data dumps and feeds, GIS software, and computer-assisted manufacturing—and a variety of traditional media, including sculpture, photography, film, and performance. At the core of his work is a focus on the social practices embedded in both new and old technologies, the ways that these practices either challenge or reinforce established categories and hierarchies, and the politics of visibility these practices engender and operate within. Rueter is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MFA program in Art and Technology Studies. In 2013 he was awarded a 2013 Prix Ars Electronica Honorary Mention in the category of Interactive Art. His work has been exhibited in galleries and at festivals across the US, including the International Symposium on Electronic Art and Northern Spark.



Marissa Lee Benedict & David Rueter  
Still from *Dark Fiber*, 2015  
Single channel video installation  
10:00 min (looping)



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