



## Due Diligence: Elizabeth Orr's Work Ethic

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University of Pennsylvania [Institute of Contemporary Art's First Among Equals](#), 2012, presented as part of a performance series curated by Bodega

by R. E. H. Gordon

**Elizabeth Orr will be performing her work, *A Moral Body*, on January 19, 2013, 7pm at Bodega.**



“work.  
 amazing.  
 do you.  
 go for it.  
 amazing.  
 perfect.  
 100%  
 totally.  
 ready.  
 yes.”

Our work takes many forms. There is the work we do for money, and the work we do for free. We work for ourselves, we work for others. Job-work. Art-work. The work of knowing one another. We work it. We compel and applaud one another for working it. Werrrrrrkkkkkk. Our work ethic. Elizabeth Orr seeks to make visible the pervasive presence of work, money, and creative labor and the ways these mediate our activities, relationships, and beliefs. Orr locates us in relation to the lived realities of these terms, not in judgment but by mapping our positions, a prying open of this thorny mess. As Orr says: “I didn’t want to make a value judgment on the ethical, religious, and the way we work, just situate it... Where, just where.”

The performance begins with Orr’s voice speaking to us about an old idea—the ethical imperative toward work passed down in the United States from its Protestant forebears. The term “Protestant work ethic,” coined in 1904 by Max Weber, has a complex and specific history but has been generalized over time to become a way of referring to a linkage between ethical behavior and hard work. A good person is a person who works. Idle hands are the devil’s tools. *Work Ethic* poses the questions: How is this belief in the ethicality of diligent labor still operational? How do we understand what we are doing in relation to these inherited narratives? Are there different ways to understand the idea of “good work,” to broaden the definition of what constitutes labor? In the aftermath of an election year defined by talk about the value of hard work and the absence of American jobs, and in the midst of the continued, if muted, development of the Occupy movement, it is an apt moment to re-map these dynamics. Artists continue to do our art-work and our job-work in the shadow of these re-emerging questions. This is, Orr’s performance indicates, a time to make art about work and about money.

*Work Ethic* is a performance in which the performers play themselves, their verbal first-person accounts serving as the center of the piece. Orr chose an emerging artist and a high-end fashion brand strategist out of enthusiasm for their personal vernaculars and the unique histories of their decisions to pursue their specific careers. Orr was drawn to these two people because of the differences between their lives, choices, and beliefs, and because they are highly motivated and hardworking queer-identified individuals in different, though interrelated, creative economies.

There are implicit tensions between their positions— the idealistic artist, highly skeptical of the influence of the market on her work and life; and the creative realist, exercising her passion for making within the boundaries and benefits of the lucrative field of high-end luxury advertising. Orr, however, is not interested in elevating or vilifying either of these positions, nor is she interested in teasing out the potential conflicts between them. “It’s like I’m an expert on richness, but I’ve never been rich, and I’ve never really been able to buy any of the things that I’m an expert at teaching people how to buy,” remarks the strategist, and we might expect this statement to be set up in the context of the piece as an object of ridicule as it would be by many in the art world who ethically differentiate between art and advertising. Rather, Orr situates each of these narratives in her piece not as exemplary or reproachable positions but as personal narratives that are the result of a complex interplay of idealism, necessity, ethics, and compromise. And in moments, the two positions reveal themselves to be not so distinct from one another; the strategist’s account of her experiences working in the world of high-end fashion advertising could be easily argued to parallel the situation of many contemporary artists with close ties to the commercial art market. In addition to the latent conflicts or confluences between them, both figures frankly discuss the internal conflicts and ambivalences they have about their own industries, expressing enthusiasm, hope, doubt, and frustration in equal measures. In this way, *Work Ethic* provokes us to see the problems and promises of the interplay between creativity, labor, and money not only in disparate creative industries but in the specific narratives of these two queer feminist makers.

This effort at leveling the distinctions between public life and private life is a thread throughout the piece, compellingly conjured in these two figures’ self-reflexive and comic descriptions of their work clothes, and the accompanying silent physical outlining of their bodies in various incarnations: This is what my body looks like. This is what I’m wearing over my body. This is what my body looks like on a good day. And this is what I’m putting over it on a good day. This is what my body looks like on a bad day. And this is what I’m putting on it on a bad day. These descriptions of their physical presences in the world fall somewhere between body image, mirror reflection, and external opinion, and in so doing locate the supposedly personal terrain of one’s own working body as hovering, unstably, between this variety of private and public contexts. Toward the end of the piece, Orr further conjures this complex interplay of public and private selves in the shift to a discussion of romance, and in so doing positions it as co-extensive with labor rather than distinct from it. Within friendships, conversations land indiscriminately on topics of work, jobs, money, clothes, romance, sex, and love, among much else, and *Work Ethic* mirrors this familiar intermingling of these diverse elements of our public and private lives.

The script of *Work Ethic* developed out of a series of informal conversations between Orr and the two performers that became formalized into the performance score through a process of reiteration. Orr subsequently facilitated *Work Ethic*’s rehearsal process through the production of a beautiful and carefully designed document, a hybrid between a dramatic script, a movement score, and a map. A line down the center of the document serves as the string that spatially divides the two figures in the performance, with color coded text horizontally and vertically providing prompts, lines, and stage direction. This document is not visible with the performance in the museum, and in looking at it I am struck by what seems to be an unnecessary investment of time and labor on Orr’s part in the production of a document that benefits only her two performers. However, Orr’s investment only seems unnecessary if I approach it as a mere tool in the service of creating the performance, for surely there are less laborious ways to communicate to performers what to say and do. Viewed more holistically, Orr’s investment in this complex private document encapsulates the web of interrelationships between work, art, and friendship that the work itself conjures. The performance’s significance lies not only in its finished state in the museum, but in the creative process that produced it as a space in which friendships and communities are elaborated and solidified. Orr put forth her labor, enjoying the particular satisfaction of doing work that exceeds mere necessity. Her labor was directed as much toward creating a finished performance as it was in the service of providing three friends with a space to talk with one another about their work.