

Working Thought

- March 5–June 26, 2022
- Heinz Galleries, Scaife
Gallery 15, Forum Gallery
- Wall Texts

Exhibition Introductory Text

Title Wall Text

Working Thought

A group exhibition of 35 artists working at the intersections of art, labor, and American economy

March 5–June 26, 2022

●Featured Artists

Laura Aguilar, Steven Bognar, Andrea Bowers, Tony Buba, Charles Burnett, Margarita Cabrera, Keith Calhoun, Tony Cokes, Moyra Davey, Kevin Jerome Everson, Andrea Fraser, Jill Freedman, Theaster Gates, Liz Glynn, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Kahlil Robert Irving, Tomashi Jackson, Barbara Kopple, Fred Lonidier, Ken Lum, Chandra McCormick, Rodney McMillian, Joe Minter, Gordon Newton, Ricardo Iamuri Robinson, Cameron Rowland, Julia Reichert, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Aaron Spangler, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Jessica Vaughn, Kara Walker, Carmen Winant, Frederick Wiseman, and Martin Wong.

●Artist Text Excerpts

Tony Cokes

Black Celebration: A Personal Note, 1988

“I was thinking about all that recent art that critics call ‘a critique of the commodity.’ I was thinking about how this critique only becomes legible in specific institutions (the gallery, the art press). I was thinking about how easily this critique becomes confused with an embrace of its alleged object. I was thinking about the limited number of people able to read this critique. I was thinking about how the critique of the commodity, for me (and other readers), took the form of street action not so long ago. I was thinking about the return of the 1960s today, how it exists in dominant media primarily on a single level: the level of fashion. A look, a sound that had its season and returns as nostalgia. Something a certain segment of the market tried on, played to excess, recanted, recuperated, or became bored with. Events, lifestyles, clothes: a leveling takes place. No history here(?) I was thinking about the recent discovery of an ‘urban underclass.’ I asked myself where this underclass ‘suddenly’ came from.”

Andrea Fraser
L'1%, C'est Moi, 2011

“We must insist that what artworks are economically centrally determines what they mean socially and also artistically. I believe that a broad-based shift in art discourse can help bring about a long overdue splitting off of the market-dominated sub-field of galleries, auction houses, and art fairs. Let this sub-field become the luxury goods business it already basically is, with what circulates there having as little to do with art as yachts, jets, and watches.”

Ken Lum
Dear Steven, 2009

“Whenever I teach, I’m always mindful of my roots. I made a sculptural installation out of rental furniture in 1982. The installation was exhibited in my studio. I was taken aback by people’s responses. A lot of people laughed at the perceived tackiness of the furniture. Others thought my aim was to poke fun at bad taste. But this was not the case. I rented the best sofas I could, based on what I thought my mother would have liked.

Today, I can see how garish the selected furniture must have looked. I recently recounted this story during a presentation I made at a well-known American art school. A noted art curator was in attendance. At the post-presentation dinner, I noticed the curator looking at me. I turned to him, and he said somewhat tentatively, ‘I don’t believe you.’ ‘What do you mean?’ I replied. He then said, ‘I don’t believe you when you say that you liked the look of the furniture you selected. It was clearly ugly.’ They were a prescient reminder that little has changed in thirty years. This individual refused to imagine how class inflects what is possible in terms of art production.”

Introductory Text

Working Thought examines how contemporary artists have considered and questioned the many ways labor and economic disparity have shaped American life past and present. The exhibition is situated specifically within the frame of Carnegie Museum of Art and its history, which dates to 1895 when steel magnate Andrew Carnegie created a cultural institution—one that would bring the world to the people of Pittsburgh, particularly those who labored in his many steel mills. Carnegie believed that cultural enrichment could serve as a salve for the exhaustion and harm of manual toil. The installation of John White Alexander's mural *The Crowning of Labor* in 1907 in the museum's Grand Staircase gave this ideology a permanent expression. Today, its visual language of labor and enlightenment remains emblematic of the institution's origins and Pittsburgh's history.

Against this backdrop, the 35 artists included in *Working Thought* offer complex and nuanced reflections on a country that remains stratified by uneven distributions of wealth and opportunity. Their works map a diverse range of artistic positions and concerns from around the United States. New commissions and loans are presented alongside selections from the museum's collection to place the institution and its holdings within a broader picture of ever-shifting economic realities. Despite the variety of the artists' approaches and the lived experiences described in their works, they all shed light on the power of art to complicate our most deeply seated assumptions about American history and the inequities that mark contemporary life.

Working Thought is presented in Heinz and Scaife Galleries until June 26 and Forum Gallery until July 31, with film screenings in the Carnegie Museum of Art Theater.

The exhibition is organized by Eric Crosby, Henry J. Heinz II Director, with Kiki Teshome, Margaret Powell Curatorial Fellow, and former curatorial assistants Ashley McNelis and Hannah Turpin. Many other staff members made essential contributions in the planning and production of *Working Thought* and their names are included in the exhibition.

Significant support for *Working Thought* is provided by Kathe and Jim Patrinos, the Susan J. and Martin G. McGuinn Exhibition Fund, and the Virginia Kaufman Fund.

Generous support is provided by Brian Wongchaowart, with additional support from the Ford Family Foundation, Nancy and Woody Ostrow, and The Fellows of Carnegie Museum of Art.

Support for curatorial research has been provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Carnegie Museum of Art is supported by The Heinz Endowments and Allegheny Regional Asset District. Carnegie Museum of Art receives state arts funding support through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Premier Partners:

Nova Chemicals, Highmark AHN, Fort Pitt Capital Group

Film Series Text

Art Theater

Five independent films, screened as part of Working Thought, are free and will take place in the Carnegie Museum of Art Theater.

● Thursday, March 17, 6–8:30 p.m.

American Factory, 2019

Directed by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, 110 minutes

Introduced by Maria Somma, United Steel Workers

In post-industrial Ohio, a Chinese billionaire opens a factory in an abandoned General Motors plant, hiring two thousand Americans. The film documents the ensuing optimism as well as clashes and setbacks in the working-class town.

● Saturday, April 9, 1:30–3:30 p.m.

Killer of Sheep, 1978, 80 minutes

Directed by Charles Burnett

Introduced by Chris Ivey, Pittsburgh-based filmmaker

Set against the backdrop of the majority Black neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles in the 1970s, the film portrays a slaughterhouse worker and the complexities of balancing work and life as he struggles to support his family.

● Thursday, April 28, 6–8 p.m.

Harlan County USA, 1976, 103 minutes

Directed by Barbara Kopple

Introduced by Lou Martin, Associate Professor of History at Chatham University

Following the 1973 coal miners' strike in Harlan County, Nebraska, this film is a harrowing account of the thirteen-month struggle between a community fighting to survive and a corporation dedicated to the bottom line.

●Saturday, May 21, 1:30–3:30 p.m.

Lightning Over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy, 1988, 80 minutes

Directed by Tony Buba

Introduced by Edith Abeyta, North Braddock-based artist

The film documents Buba's beloved Braddock community—its anxiety and activism that accompanied the failure of the steel industry in and around Pittsburgh.

●Thursday, June 16, 6–9 p.m.

Welfare, 1975, 167 minutes

Directed by Frederick Wiseman

Introduced by Ken Regal, Executive Director of Just Harvest

Welfare captures the inner workings of the welfare system in the pivotal moment of the 1970s when Richard Nixon's political campaign to reform federal social support was underway. Office staff as well as clients struggle to cope with and interpret the laws and regulations that govern their work and life.