

North Adams

“The Workers”

MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
(MASS MOCA)

87 Marshall Street
May 29–March 15



Oded Hirsch, *Tochka*, 2010, still from a single-channel video, 14 minutes 20 seconds.

In Oded Hirsch’s fourteen-minute video *Tochka*, 2010, a dozen men build a rickety bridge across a shallow gorge in a lush green landscape. Dressed in blue workmen’s uniforms with white hats pulled low over their eyes and yellow buckets strung from their hips, the men toil with a ridiculous assortment of tools and materials—sticks, shovels, mud, rope, an enormous steel spool—to create a contraption that looks more like a medieval catapult than a practical overpass and which, in the end, nearly collapses when they cross. One of the more striking pieces in this ten-month-long exhibition on the pleasures, sorrows, and increasingly precarious conditions of work, *Tochka* also offers the most poetic interpretation of the show’s multiple and competing themes.

“The Workers” is an expanded version of an earlier show, “*En cada instante, ruptura*” (In Every Instant, Rupture), curated by Carla Herrera-Prats for the Sale de Arte Público Siqueiros in Mexico City. While the previous project focused on the strategies to which artists are turning to render visible the devastating changes to the landscape of labor, the current exhibition, curated by Herrera-Prats and MASS MoCA’s Susan Cross, not only illustrates but also embodies how people work (piecemeal) today. With admirable modesty and impressive subtlety, “The Workers” narrows the gap between artists and workers who would otherwise eye each other suspiciously across a chasm of privilege, complicity, or purity of purpose. From the artists Emily Jacir and Mircea Cantor documenting ephemeral, high-stakes action to the day laborers in Adrian Paci’s *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea* (Detention Center), 2007, and from the street vendors in Oliver Ressler’s *Socialism Failed, Capitalism Is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?*, 2010, to the factory workers who collaborated with Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre to create *Maquilapolis*, 2006, there is common cause among members of the new global “precarariat,” whether they come from manufacturing, the knowledge economy, or the wageless workforce of contemporary art.

Hirsch’s bridge in *Tochka*—crafty, nostalgic, highly inefficient yet still somehow emancipatory and sublime—provides an apt metaphor for the exhibition, in which we see the confluence of the creative and collaborative process and the labor of art at large. More concretely, works by Mary Lum, Camel Collective, and Laboratorio 060 address the history of the site—down to the last labor contract negotiated there—and MASS MoCA’s ambiguous role in turning a former factory town into a tourist destination. Maybe because the exhibition is up for so long, it has created an interesting, albeit distant, echo chamber, coinciding with the New Museum’s exhibition “Ostalgia,” e-flux’s reader *Are You Working Too Much?*, and Ross Perlin’s book *Intern Nation*, to say nothing of the convergence of the so-called Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, all of which are rooted in unemployment and exploitation. In the exhibition’s forthcoming catalogue, the curators and the labor historian Andrew Ross issue tentative calls for greater political mobilization and collective action. They may see them answered sooner, and louder, than any of us thought.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie