

**RELATIONAL
ECONOMIES**

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LABOR

CAPITAL

RELATIONAL ECONOMIES: LABOR OVER CAPITAL

mayfield brooks

Tania Candiani

Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkáčová

Danilo Correale

Stephanie Syjuco

Stefanos Tsivopoulos

Value is the basis for economic exchange, or any exchange between sentient beings. In many ways, what we value defines our existence, from the beliefs we hold dear to the socio-economic status that shapes the conditions of lived experience. The fluid nature of evaluation – that it fluctuates on the basis of forces that are often emotionally driven and political in nature, and generally not visible, let alone under our control – is exemplified by the unpredictable status of art, which encompasses objects, experiences, and ideas. As an exhibition and proposition, *Relational Economies: Labor over Capital* asks how value is attributed to objects and ideas, artful or otherwise. How do economic systems impact human relations and behaviors? How can the transactional financial networks that capitalism comprises be resisted or improved upon?

In taking stock of the economic circumstances that frame our contemporary reality, we can assume that anyone reading this is somehow implicated, one way or another, by capital – ownership and debt – intertwined with identity, class positioning, and labor. Labor operates at all levels of daily life, with some forms of work are well compensated, others less so, and still some unpaid. Menial labor supports administrative labor, which assists professional and executive-level labor, which often serves a small percentage of the wealthiest individuals. Ubiquitous, but less visible, domestic labor, is often work performed by women within families, that is typically underpaid, underappreciated, and unacknowledged. The daily grind of work-life gives many purpose and pride, but for some, mobility is illusive, or worse yet, work is simply a structure of oppression.

The relational aspects of an economy are multilayered. Tensions between capital and labor, between wealth and survival, not only represent a binary between haves and have-nots, but also reflect values inherent to class position. Relationality within a subset of the labor pool is depicted in Tania Candiani's *Labor Choreography* (2017), set in Kochi, located in India's Kerala province, where she documented a group of women at a construction site, carrying building materials up several levels of scaffolding. The mechanical sounds of a generator motor, shoveling of gravel, cyclists, and cars form the soundscape for the choreography of mutual, interrelated gestures. Their balletic synchronized movements sweep up and down the scaffold: pieces of masonry are quickly passed upwards; the pace slowing to a near stop as each waits her turn to drink from a plastic water bottle that is passed from one level to the next. Once accomplished, the break is over, and the women resume transporting wet cement up the chain. The women on the highest level are assisted by a man who helps them hoist the heavy material onto their heads, carrying it out of view of Candiani's camera.

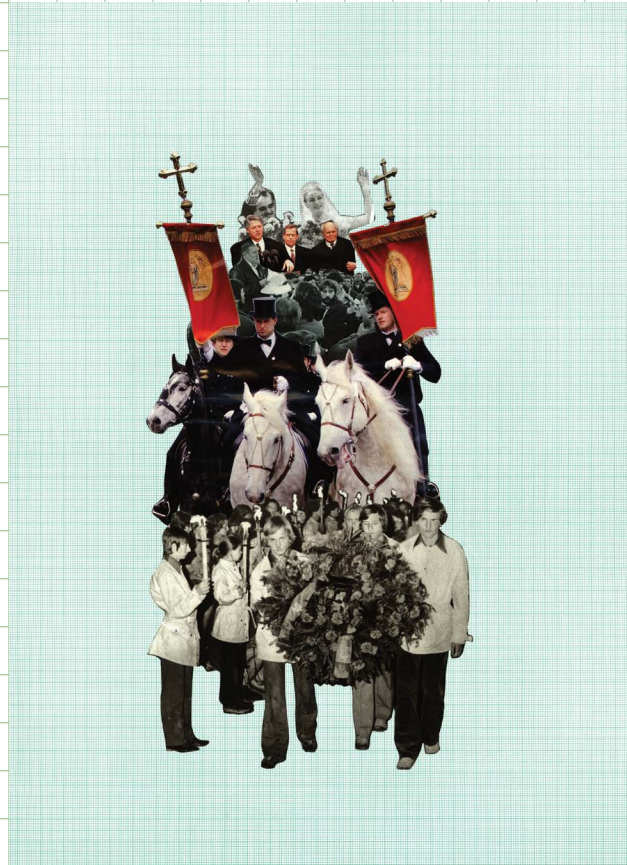
Labor Choreography registers as an experimental video in which the action is readymade – unsurprising considering how commonplace construction work has become in urban centers around the globe, familiar signs of development and gentrification. As a found work of choreography, Candiani's piece reveals the individual side of collective physical labor, each woman dressed in an anti-uniform of contrasting colors and prints, with fabric headwraps blocking them from intense sunlight, as their figures, animated by gloved hands in orange, white, blue, and yellow, pass the construction material up and away. In a



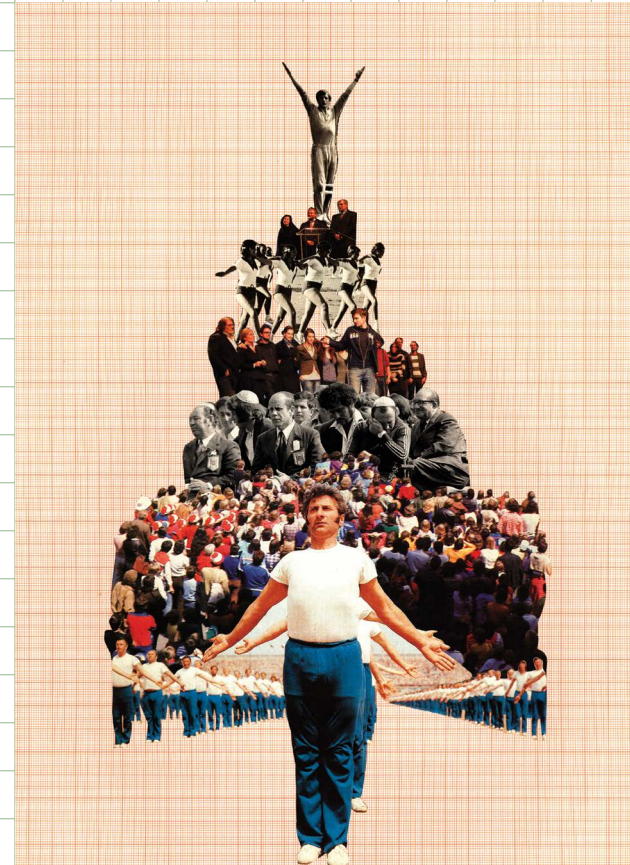
Tania Candiani, *Labor Choreography I*, 2017.
Single-channel video, sound. 8:03 min. Video still.
Courtesy of the artist.

similarly vertical formation, Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová's *After the Order* (2006–2010) abstractly reimagines *The Pyramid of Capitalist System*, an American caricature that critiqued the stratification inherent to capitalism,¹ published in 1911 in the *Industrial Worker*, a quarterly magazine that was “the voice of revolutionary industrial unionism.”² The illustration, commissioned by Nedelkovich, Brashick and Kuharich³ for the International Publishing Company in Cleveland, Ohio, depicts the tiers of class oppression.⁴

Chisa and Tkáčová describe their approach to *After the Order* as an “imagining [of] utopias [much] like making collages: some (ideal) extracts and (perfect) cut-outs of reality are juxtaposed and glued into complex flawless scenarios, into surreally harmonious worlds.”⁵ The artists have collaged figures into pyramidal compositions, conflating the hierarchy of wealth and labor of the 1911 cartoon with



Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkáčová, *After the Order*, 2006-2010.
Series of collages.
Courtesy of the artists.



the *Spartakiady*, mass events that were staged by regimes in Eastern bloc countries as manifestations of their communist ideals. These athletic-political performances – with elaborate and ornamental gymnastic formations – date as far back as the 1860s, continuing in different forms until 1970, when the event in Prague was canceled by authorities due to concern that they wouldn't be able to control rising anti-communist sentiment.⁶

The political intention of these performances was to visualize equality, yet Chisa and Tkáčová note that they often “tended toward vertical compositions, as if there was a permanent need for stratification.” The artists cite Czech historian Petr Roubal, whose 2017 book *Československé Spartakiády* traces the history of these public spectacles, accounting for scale and political intent, with one gathering in Prague in 1955 involving more than a million participants, many of whom were under political pressure to take part. As inspiration for their collage series (and in 2011, an edible rendition of the pyramid in the form of a multi-tiered cake), the artists culled images from *Spartakiad* books, collaging them with cut-outs from magazines and newspapers, creating “unexpected collisions, improbable ideologies [...] imagined societies, experimental utopias and new world orders [...] The technique of collage allowed reality in its concrete variety to penetrate the composition, while also making it possible for the resulted pattern to engage with that reality. The collaged diagrams are in effect a combination of *trompe l'oeil* and *trompe l'esprit*.”⁷

Circumstances produced by hierarchies of wealth and class are further visualized by Danilo Correale in his abstract and text-based painting series *A Spectacular Miscalculation in Global Asymmetry* (2018-ongoing), in which he attempts to diagram seemingly immeasurable data sets. His most recent painting in the series, *Effects of Full-Time Employment on Mental Health by Generations Since 1914* (2019), charts the correlation between work and psychological well-being. A World Health Organization study published in 2000 recognizes that “All of us have the right to decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security



Danilo Correale, Detail from *The Voice Within*, 2018-ongoing.
Variable dimensions.
Private collection, courtesy of the artist.

and human dignity.” The study acknowledges the pervasiveness of mental illness, and that for those living with mental and physical disabilities, “achieving this right [to decent and productive work] is particularly challenging.”⁸ Consider what it means to have this right. Who has the means to pursue this right? And, in what parts of the world does the social welfare system surrounding work support the realization of this right? Correale’s painting is constructed through extremely broad strokes; much like the

opacity of the artist’s depiction of mental health vis-à-vis full-time employment, the power structures and systems that determine workplace culture are often difficult, and at times impossible, for workers to grasp.

Stefanos Tsvipoulos’ three-channel film, *History Zero* (2013) intertwines three radically different experiences of wealth, or the lack of it: an artist, an art collector, and a homeless immigrant, whose lives intersect ever so briefly in Athens, set against the backdrop of the financial crisis that began nearly a decade ago. Each film focuses on one of the characters, whose fortunes are unwittingly linked to one

another through objects that have circulated between them, without any kind of transactional expectation. The art collector makes origami flowers, using euro bills stashed in her desk drawer, in a sitting room full of artworks by artists like Pawel Althamer, David Altmejd, Anna Gaskel, Matthew Monahan, and Juergen Teller. As the collector’s memory fades, she disposes of the flowers, which are eventually found by the homeless immigrant. Having collected scrap metal, and other valuable remains in abandoned, decommissioned buildings, his discovery of the flowers presents him with unknown possibilities. Eventually, the artist finds the homeless man’s abandoned shopping cart. Regarding it as free material for his own artwork, he wheels it away. The cycle of goods between these three characters demonstrates the mutability of value, contingent on particular and individual needs and desires.



Stefanos Tsvipoulos, *History Zero*, 2013.
Three-channel video installation, color, sound, 34 min.
Video stills.
Courtesy of the artist and Prometeogallery di Ida Pisani.

Relational Economies: Labor over Capital

The Greek financial crisis was, in part, a result of the formation of the European Union in 1992 and the launch of the Euro currency in 1999. In order to join the Eurozone, Greece misrepresented its finances, “with a budget deficit well over 3 percent and a debt level above 100 percent of GDP.”⁹ According to a 2016 report in *The New York Times*, the “euro binds 19 nations into a single currency zone watched over by the European Central Bank but leaves budget and tax policy in the hands of each country, an arrangement that some economists believe was doomed from the start.”¹⁰ The fledgling euro currency coincided with new forms of transactions that circulated abstractly: questionable and unregulated credit default swaps, Ponzi schemes, and money laundering. As critic Gregory Sholette wrote, *History Zero* “addresses capital’s paradoxical identity as both tangible artifact and immaterial overlord.”¹¹ The logic of Tsivopoulos’ work as an experimental film twists conventions expected from narrative by enacting the fantasy of forgetting, laying out possible scenarios that memory loss might afford.

At The 8th Floor, Tsivopoulos presents *History Zero* as a film installation that is expanded into an architecture of display, integrated with archival images, texts, and objects, representing thirty-two substitute currencies from his ongoing research project *Alternative Currencies: An Archive And A Manifesto*. Initially shown in 2013 at the Venice Biennale, the archive continues to take different forms, this time activated by performative engagement. Examples of alternative currencies in the archive include Cattle, Lending Libraries and Collaborative Consumption, and the Rolling Jubilee. Cattle has been a form of currency in Ancient Greece, Medieval Europe, India, Colonial Europe, and still today in



Stefanos Tsivopoulos, *Alternative Economies: An Archive And A Manifesto*, 2013. Installation view (detail).

Architectural installation, silkscreen print on thirty-two pinewood panels. Greek Pavilion, 55th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy of the artist and Prometeogallery di Ida Pisani. Photo by the artist.

Africa. As Tsivopoulos writes, “Essentially, almost everywhere you can find cattle, they were at one time used as money.”¹² Lending Libraries and Collaborative Consumption are community organized exchange programs like tool sharing, a practice that often includes Do-It-Yourself guides for tool use,¹³ and seed libraries which promote biodiversity, “encouraging an alternative to the genetically modified seeds produced by large corporations.”¹⁴ Rolling Jubilee is a project of Strike Debt, emerging from the Occupy Wall Street movement, which has organized a global debt resistance initiative. Rolling Jubilee raises funds to pay off and abolish debt.¹⁵ Another featured currency is Spirit Money, which is burned and released into the spirit world – for the dead, to bribe ghosts and other spirits, and for acts of worship, a practice common in East Asia.¹⁶ Tsivopoulos’ intention is



Tania Candiani, *Del sonido de la labor. Cantos de trabajo/From the Sound of Labor. Work Songs*, 2019.
Single-channel video, color, sound. 12:58 min. Video stills.
Courtesy of the artist.

to keep the archive open to interpretation. During the course of the exhibition, the archive will be activated by performers in order to aid viewers in accessing the depth of content, which traverses both history and geography, enabling countless readings.

The multisensory nature of the installation, combining *History Zero* and *Alternative Currencies: An Archive And A Manifesto* – involving reading, movement, interactive and improvisational performance – corresponds formally with other artworks in the exhibition. In her series of videos titled *El Sonido de la Labor*, Tania Candiani synthesizes visual art with sound compositions drawn from traditions of labor in the Caribbean, specifically Cuban sugarcane plantations. The immersive experience of her video *Del sonido de la labor. Cantos de trabajo/From the Sound of Labor. Work Songs* (2019), is one of watching and

listening, one of remembrance of Cuba's history of slavery that speaks to transcending the bondage that enabled the sugar cane industry to flourish in Cuba. The city of Trinidad, where Candiani staged her video, is part of the Slave Route Project (a UNESCO Project promoting “mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation among peoples to break the silence surrounding the slave trade and slavery that have concerned all continents”¹⁷), rich with cultural artifacts reminiscent of the historic slave narratives of the area, including architectural remains – ruins of dams, wells, distilleries, and slave housing. The city is home to a number of religious musical and dance groups whose work honors the “presence of Africans and their descendants in Cuba,” including the house-temples Kalunga and Yemayá, among others.¹⁸

Candiani filmed the project in multiple sites within the Valle de los ingenios, including a building with mural covered walls that refer to a process of cultivation, extraction, and commercialization.¹⁹ The singers' collective voice becomes the protagonist in a story that plays out as a roving, open air opera. The work songs are performed by the Tonadas Trinitarias choir ensemble, with melodies that embody a unique modality within the complex Afro-Cuban musical manifestations exclusive to the city of Trinidad, located in the province of Sancti Spiritu. These songs are a product of the encounter between the guajira tradition, the musical practices derived from the Bantú, and the melodic twirls coming from Spain. The first verse begins with the plaintive request,

“I ask you Master, to let me sing, to let me sing, to let me sing...”



mayfield brooks, *Viewing Hours*, performance at The Kitchen, April 6, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.
Left: Photograph by Carol A'Hearn. Right: Photograph by Paula Court.

According to the artist, those working the fields had to ask permission to sing after working hours. In realizing these songs of labor, Candiani amplifies slave narratives that have been obscured by Cuba's more recent revolutionary political identity.

Also addressing the legacy of slavery, and more pointedly, reparations, choreographer mayfield brooks' *Viewing Hours* (2019) is presented as a performance and installation conceived to create a space for meditation on death, decomposition, and witnessing, one that the artist describes as a call to action. Recognizing the immeasurable losses experienced by black and brown Americans both during and in the aftermath of slavery, brooks takes a long view in approaching reparations, one in which all Americans will need to confront the

discomfort of reckoning with this painful history. After brooks studied dance in graduate school, they later apprenticed as an urban farmer, an experience they describe as their first encounter with abundance that did not involve money. Moving between dance and farming (farming as a way to symbolically reclaim land that has been stolen from African Americans), brooks has developed an artistic approach that integrates the practice of "improvising while black":

I've always had this kind of tumultuous relationship with dance as a presentational form that doesn't always give me fulfillment. In 2013, I wrote about improvisation in relation to blackness and came up with this term: improvising while black or IWB which became the umbrella for all my work – dance scores, teaching, community experiments, zines, happenings[...] I thought about improvising in a tight space so as to move towards a larger idea and feeling, but not necessarily freedom. I thought of improvising as a way of being in the wreckage that is American history and blackness. I brought in my experience of growing up in the church, and early experiences of the charismatic – singing gospel, speaking in tongues – which is somatic and very movement-oriented, into my dance practice.

Contrary to expectations of contemporary dance, brooks' *Viewing Hours* will register for many as a contemplative piece of performance art that tests the artist's capacity to remain still beneath the compost and plant matter that enshrouds their body. Reminiscent of a wake, the body becomes a site for receiving the emotional and spiritual energies that converge around the desire for, and right to, reparations.



Danilo Correale, *Untitled (on the destruction of work)*, 2014-2017.
Ink on paper.
Courtesy of the artist.

In his series *A Spectacular Miscalculation of Global Asymmetry*, Danilo Correale graphically visualizes the scale and proportions of exploitation – political, economic, and social – faced by workers around the world. Like Brooks' focus on reparations, Correale is concerned with the ways in which different types of contemporary employment deplete workers of their resources. Having

researched the circumstances of those working in call centers in places like Manila and Bangalore for weeks and months at a time, Correale advocates for a moratorium on work as we know it, having written a manifesto for the workers' right not only to destroy work, but to destroy the economic superstructure. As working hours have been extended into a 24-hour economy, the artist is especially concerned with labor infiltrating sleep, with an invisible labor force in fulfillment centers that support the West's habits of conspicuous consumption. While there is an abundance of cheap parts and underpaid labor to enable our lifestyles, Western culture is driven by the expectation that we are defined by our work. To counter this pressure, Correale offers *Reverie: on the liberation from work* (2017), a two-part guided meditation to "help you visualize what a life freed of work can be," in order to imagine a post-work future.



Stephanie Syjuco, *FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Reading Room*, 2012.
Installation view (detail) at ZERO1 Art and Technology Biennial, San Jose, CA.
Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

For many reading this, a post-work future may feel like a fantasy. How would that operate? Would it involve a restructuring of all systems through a violent or abrupt revolutionary act? As unreal as it may seem, change is only possible if we allow ourselves to imagine it. In more practical terms, the systems of exchange documented by Stefanos Tsivopoulos' *Alternative Currencies: An Archive And A Manifesto* offer multiple means for resistance, suggesting that many alternative economies and currencies are emerging, and continuously sustained by the will of the community. Community organizing, and an alternative structure for the sharing of knowledge can be found in *FREE TEXTS*, an open source reading room that Stephanie Syjuco conceived of in 2012. Founded to facilitate the distribution of texts crowdsourced from different publications, each version is curated around themes such as social justice, activism, open source culture, copyright, empire, capitalism, feminism, and art. Installed as a

collection of tear-off flyers, the piece invites viewers to pull tabs advertising URLs, from which they can download readings related to historical and political movements. Presented at The 8th Floor is a selection of approximately 150 texts collated in dialogue with the theme of the exhibition. The artist suggests that the collection of *FREE TEXTS* functions like a cloud of associative knowledge, from publishing about the commons and historical documents about the Art Workers Coalition, to more contemporary political writing about Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.). Syjuco's process is designed to "pay forward" the knowledge-base and distinct concerns of the exhibitions and institutions that each iteration involves. By creating an alternative distribution point, Syjuco challenges the conventions of copyright, suggesting that the circulation of knowledge is unruly, and, at times, unregulated. Some visitors may encounter the piece for its conceptual effects: a wallpaper compilation of titles and authors including Noam Chomsky's *Occupy (Occupied Media Pamphlet Series)*, 2012; Lewis Hyde's *The Gift (Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property)*, 1979; Saskia Sassen's *Globalization & Its Discontents*, 1999; and McKenzie Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto*, 2004. On its own, the list of included titles generates meaning by proximity of ideas and themes, but the deeper effects of *FREE TEXTS* come from actively partaking and the sharing of newfound information.

Within these artistic projects there is a proliferation of propositions for radically different ways to balance work and life, debt and income, the collective and the individual. A post-work economy, seed libraries, the sharing of tools, and the circulation of open source knowledge systems are all envisioned as ways to cut, paste, and



Photographs of M'Finda Kalunga Community Garden. <https://www.mkgarden.org>.

dismantle the hierarchies that delineate our current political and economic life. They make it possible to contemplate forgetting work, and posit gardening as a step towards reparations. Each of these possibilities require relational engagement at the community level, with a recognition and acceptance of history. In a city like New York, a radically different balance might be found in our very own backyards, taking the form of something akin to a community garden.

On Manhattan's Lower East Side sits M'Finda Kalunga Garden (which translated from the Kikongo language means "Garden at the Edge of the Other Side of the World"), named in memory of what's known as the second African American burial ground. The original site of the cemetery was at 195 Chrystie Street (it extended partially beneath the New Museum's building on the Bowery), and a community garden was established in 1983 in response to the lack of affordable housing and an overwhelming drug problem in the area. Its mission is to "protect

and improve the community for the people who live and work here,” modeling an alternative economy that defies the transactions of the businesses surrounding Sara D. Roosevelt Park where it is located.²⁰

“In exchange for this small patch of nature, we’ve agreed to be active participants in the maintenance and growth of this valuable community resource. Members have responsibilities which, when shared equally among all of us, are not time consuming or difficult.”²¹

– Sara Reisman, November 2019

Endnotes

- 1 The American cartoon was based on a Russian illustration from 1901 “Pyramid of Capitalist System.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, April 14, 2014. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramid_of_Capitalist_System.
- 2 “Industrial Worker.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, March 20, 2005. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Worker.
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- 13 Ibid, p. 46
- 14 Wang, Joy Y. “A Seed Library for Heirloom Plants Thrives in the Hudson Valley.” The New York Times, October 6, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/garden/07seed.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.
- 15 Tsivopoulos, Stefanos. “Alternative Currencies. An Archive and a Manifesto.” In *Stefanos Tsivopoulos: History Zero: 55th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale Di Venezia, the Greek Pavilion*, 27-65. Athens: Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Culture and Sports, 2013. p. 52
- 16 Ibid, p. 53
- 17 “The Slave Route.” Social and Human Sciences. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/slave-route/>.
- 18 “Historic Trinidad: the Urban Center and the Valley of the Sugar Factories.” Slavery and Remembrance: A Guide to Sites, Museums, and Memory. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d. <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/partners/partner/?id=P0049>.
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- 21 Ibid.

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The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives and to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City. The 8th Floor is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. School groups are encouraged. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. The8thFloor.org

THE 8TH FLOOR



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