Although I struggle with a sense of loss, I must admit how fitting it is that Robyn Laba’s most recent sculpture, Newswork (2007), exhibited at Artspeak (May 26 – June 23, 2007), has since been dismantled and wheeled out to the recycling bin. It seems appropriate that this monumental sculpture should have such a fate, given that the piece was comprised of used and recycled newspapers. When the exhibition closed, its materials were immediately torn apart and reinserted into the cycle of industrialized waste management.

From the point of view of the working artist, the appeal of newspapers as the basis of a sculpture is practical, since this material is affordable, low-tech and readily available. But what inspires a sense of surprise upon seeing the piece is the question of how, precisely, the artist managed to come up with such a surprise upon seeing the piece is the question of how, precisely, the artist managed to come up with such a sculpture. The peal of newspapers as the basis of a sculpture is practical, since this material is affordable, low-tech and readily available. But what inspires a sense of surprise upon seeing the piece is the question of how, precisely, the artist managed to come up with such a sculpture. The peal of newspapers as the basis of a sculpture is practical, since this material is affordable, low-tech and readily available. But what inspires a sense of surprise upon seeing the piece is the question of how, precisely, the artist managed to come up with such a sculpture.

This is not surprising, given her formative studies, in particular the writings of Hannah Arendt, in action, based on the idea that practical, since this material is affordable, low-tech and readily available. But what inspires a sense of surprise upon seeing the piece is the question of how, precisely, the artist managed to come up with such a sculpture.

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Monuments are generally made to commemorate the work of Robert Filliou, Antonia Hirsch, Ray Johnson, N.E. Thing Co., and Jeff Wall, among others. Although she has created a number of smaller, focused projects, such as the formidable canvasses of hard-woven white ballrooms in Breathless (2002), the philosophical interrogation of thought and action, based on the writings of Hannah Arendt, in her Thinking/Judging (2005) project. Because they rely on hours of patient accumulation and hard manual labor, Laba’s artworks recall those forms of labour – artisanal, craft-based, and domestic – that have been consistently undervalued in the modern world. At the same time, because they are built from highly industrialized materials, her work shares clear any sentimental nostalgia for premodern times. Rather than romantically mimicking the alienation so pervasive in our regular jobs, Laba’s work as an artist appears to manifest and display the act of meaningful labour. In doing so, she confronts the work that is necessary to make the news available on a daily basis, including the wood pulp that goes into newsprint.

The digitization of the media has eroded the historical independence of the newspaper industry, as has done in every other cultural sector. These days, we get our news on the move, a little bit at a time, with reading, listening, and watching all standard parts of the mix. From the perspective of today’s consumers, the newspaper business likely appears outdated, computing as it does against more dominant forms of media. Its earlier scope and quality stands compromised by market interests that demand an ever-increasing concentration of ownership, multimedia convergence, and advertising dollars. Perhaps this is why the sense of precarity in Laba’s newspaper sculpture seems so appropriate, and so profound.

In its critical engagement with industrial structures and information systems, Laba’s work owes something to both the minimalist and conceptual traditions stemming from the breakaway of modernism. This is not surprising, given her formative studies at UBC with post-conceptual artists including Ken Lum and Jeff Wall. Although she has created a number of smaller, focused projects, such as the formidable canvasses of hard-woven white ballrooms in Breathless (2002), the philosophical interrogation of thought and action, based on the writings of Hannah Arendt, in her Thinking/Judging (2005) project. Because they rely on hours of patient accumulation and hard manual labor, Laba’s artworks recall those forms of labour – artisanal, craft-based, and domestic – that have been consistently undervalued in the modern world. At the same time, because they are built from highly industrialized materials, her work shares clear any sentimental nostalgia for premodern times. Rather than romantically mimicking the alienation so pervasive in our regular jobs, Laba’s work as an artist appears to manifest and display the act of meaningful labour.

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Te retain structural stability, the centre of Laba’s Newswork was cut out to allow room for the insertion of a voxel shore part. Together with the inherently fragile structure, the hale in the centre of Laba’s Newswork suggests the sculpture’s weighty material presence, eliciting countering forces of both precariousness and immateriality. In this respect the work also addresses the conditions of our global information society, and the role played by the mass media in supporting this way of life. Few people, regardless of their social position, remain untouched by the current transition toward conditions of immaterial labour, producing increasingly abstract goods that are connected to service, culture, knowledge, and communication. These increasingly pervasive conditions have produced a consumptive fetishization of information, where keeping up to date presumably the key to a future of opportunity, belonging, and increased social mobility.

One of the most striking features of the piece is its ability to fly in the face of prevailing logic, and create ambiguity with respect to its intended social function. Its sheer materiality reminds the viewer of the stuff that is necessary to make the news available on a daily basis, including the wood pulp that goes into newsprint.

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