Exhaustion and burn-out were among the themes offered as informing this city-wide biennial show. It was appropriate that the exhibition, ambitious as it was, at least did not prove physically exhausting through occupying most of the city’s available galleries and artist-run spaces. Few artists were encouraged to venture outside such zones of protection, except Esther Stocker, whose exemplary posters are composed of statements such as ‘I cannot, in all conscience, do what you request’ – a form of counter-advertising against the slogans of the new economy that insist, in various ways, ‘I can’. The other major public work was Roman Ondík’s Failed Fall, 2008, a generous spring offering of deciduous leaf fall from native trees – this was distributed messily across the floor of the Winter Garden, central Sheffield’s home of exotic planting, to the delight of visitors and children. This was a well conceived, holiday-spirited seasonal adjustment, aural as much as visual, and the frisking children were capable of grasping its licence without delimiting it as art.

Indoors, at the Millennium Galleries and elsewhere, art, rather than life, was insisted on: and one could hear its struggles for life as it was stifled by the theses of Jan Verwoert, the curator who worked with Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum to make this show. Verwoert’s theses are interesting, important and acute, and concern the possibility of subtle forms of resistance to the pressure to perform in a period of capitalism where service industries are becoming dominant; or if not actually dominant, paradigmatic, specifically in the demand that one is always, everywhere, ready to work. Verwoert’s thinking was offered with particular reference to Sheffield’s advance into a mostly post-industrial era, in other words an era in which people in other countries make most of the things people buy, and increasingly get recruited into the performance economy to answer the service lines when they go wrong. There was an unusual, albeit specialised pleasure to be gained from seeing which works were independently rich enough in their internal thinking to grapple with these historical transformations of labour, and to survive as contemporary works of art in their own right. Journalling pieces, such as Nasrin Tabatabai’s Passage, 2005, exemplified Verwoert’s concerns perfectly. This documentary shadows an Iranian woman seeking asylum who has adopted a Rotterdam shopping centre as her place of work: giving out free newspapers and inquiring into the lives of those she comes to know. People deemed marginal face a particular struggle in that they are forced endlessly to perform their own role, not to stray from it. Tabatabai’s portrait of someone seeking to extend their subjectivity through engaging generously with strangers’ concerns is powerful. But it is powerful as art-sponsored journalism, art’s performance here functionally restricted to nominating a subject TV would be unlikely to adopt.

There was frequent recourse to work by eastern European artists of the 70s – Jiri Kovanda, Ryszard Wasko, the late Jülius Koller, whose inspired deftness and variations on the usefulness of the UFO as a language game were the subject of a memorial display, and Mladen Stilinović, who did some exemplary sleeping in 1978. They comprised a speculative genealogy for contemporary art of the Verwoert tendency – art which finds oblique ways of saying no, or just refuses to hear the questions it has been asked. The presence of these artists seemed to be saying: contemporary slackers, shirkers and refusers of the injunction to perform, you are the honorary descendants of dissidents who kept each other warm by telling jokes the censors couldn’t understand and publicising (to friends) virtually invisible actions, after the event. Step forward for your medals! A genealogy of inexplicit protest is certainly needed, but few contemporary works could rise to Koller’s and Kovanda’s wit. Perhaps Janice Kerbel’s posters come closest: advertising spiel, in music ball fonts, for female performers such as Faintgirl, who passes out at any untruth. The historical here functioned as a ruse, a red herring that unsettled the viewer’s understanding of precisely how these works managed to feel both vividly complete and realised, but also thoroughly, openly relevant to feelings commonly felt.

Nevertheless, the informing ideas and the essay were one thing, and the selection of the exhibition was clearly another. There was no real explanation as to why everything ended up looking so tidy and polite, other than that Verwoert was working from formal criteria governing the selection that could, indeed should, be discussed separately from his interesting theses on labour. A crude examination by medium reveals that, of contemporary painters, for example, ‘Yes, No and Other Options’ included just Silke Otto-Knapp, Tomma Abts and Esther Stocker (black, grey and white, mechanically applied system paintings), who together represent a rather wan, dry and also polychromic selection. Abts’ coloured drawings did work well at the St Artspace in the company of Deimantas Narkevičius’s 2007 Revisiting Solaris. This pays tribute to an empty Soviet television station and to the now aged Lithuanian actor who played Kris Kelvin in Tarkovsky’s 1972 film. Double Sandtable, a giant sandtray going around a corner by Nicole Wermers,
anchored the science-fictional abstracts of the film, and Abit's drawings, by its materiality. It felt like an abstraction holding waxyly onto a function – to extinguish cigarette butts. This grouping was a rarity in its eloquence.

Elsewhere, interpretation panels constantly returned the viewer to the theme, like some omnipresent textbook. But to return to the unacknowledged question of medium: as a selection of contemporary painting designed to answer the questions Verwoert had set this was thin. Otto-Knapp's silvered paintings of dancers have an elegant sense of retreat and for me had the effect of emphasising how precisely the selection dodged the curatorial challenge of presenting performance work more strongly. There was just one live performance by Kerbel. Live performance involves a variety of social contracts with an assembled audience or a solitary spectator, and is eminently an area where "other options" than yes or no may be explored with subtlety, force and fullness. Performance or action conceived for and limited by video recording and presentation faces a more difficult task. There was recorded work in the show that retained strong vitality. Insults and Praises, 2001, by Tim Etchells & Vlatka Horvat, set up an exemplary system of rules: 'Take it in turns to insult each other or praise one another, facing camera. You may laugh.' The crucial point was that the work itself allowed one to work out what these rules were. 'You believe the National Enquirer and the Sunday Sport.' 'You're obsessed with being mean.' ‘You are mean.' What is admirable in this is that the rules generate immense emotional complexity: feelings of warmth, solidarity in adversity and confusion, all improvised and yet done with skill and care. Phil Collins's Ramallah danceathon, they shoot horses, 2004, likewise establishes its own territory for the pleasures of uncertain solidarity, by making a shared space for spectators and groups of Palestinians who were asked to dance over a working day. It's one of the works that takes charge of its context.

Seminars are a dynamic form of learning as are lectures, and large-scale exhibitions modelled on these forms have a weird intensity that is wholly preferable to the blandishments of hit-and-run outreach or the touristic involvement of visiting artists, the oft-diagnosed but still too pervasive problems of biennials. Verwoert and the Sheffield curators can be congratulated for going out on a limb and doing something highly specific and unusual. But art makes its own proposals, lectures and seminars. Regrettably, one of the things the exhibition conveyed too often was an anxiety as to whether art could be trusted to offer insights relevant to such urgent contemporary discussions on its own terms, without a professor on hand to guarantee that its critical operations would happen just as he said they would.

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Broadcast Yourself
Hatton Gallery Newcastle February 28 to April 5

Television is little given to reflecting seriously on its own protocols, rituals and structures. There is something immediately welcome therefore about an exhibition devoted to the way that artists over the past 40 years have occasionally succeeded in opening TV up as a cultural forum and in challenging the authority of the broadcasters. It is also good to be reminded that the idea of broadcasting oneself goes back