Clocking off

Sheffield’s art biennial is all about work. But the art on show celebrates the slacker, the saboteur, the carpet-sniffer. What a way to make a living, says Adrian Searle.

Andrew Cooke offers advice to reluctant workers on the subjects of mechanical sabotage, absenteeism, theft and work avoidance. Withholding enthusiasm, he says, “can be particularly effective in the service sector.” The artist provides a checklist: don’t be enthusiastic; don’t be polite; don’t smile; don’t have a nice day; and don’t go that extra mile. I warm to this project.

Pop’s rudest twins How Hollywood learned to love the Coens  Alan Dale: life after Neighbours Nancy Banks-Smith
But if slacking and sabotage are Cooke's thing, why has he gone to all the effort of making a video in which he uses his own head as a vacuum cleaner? The Sheffield-based artist crawls on elbows and knees, rubbing his head back and forth on an acre of carpet, making an annoying, dribbly, whining noise as he goes. Imagine the smell of the carpet, the rub of the pile against his head. It looks hard and horrible work, but according to the guide to Art Sheffield 08, turning your head into a Hoover is "a strategy of pushing over-identification with work to the point of defiance".

Subtitled Yes, No and Other Options, Art Sheffield 08 is a city-wide show of local and international art that attempts to make sense of today's post-industrial service economy. You could say that Cooke confronts the issue head on. Tim Etchells, on the other hand, keeps us mulling about on the Sheffield streets, responding sheep-like to his illuminated neon sign reading WAIT HERE I HAVE GONE TO GET HELP. This is weak. Etchells' video exchanges with artist Vlata Horvat, in which the pair insult and compliment each other, are much better, however much they owe to Bruce Nauman. As they tear each other apart ("I'll pay someone to kill you", "I'll cut your cock off") and make up ("I'll buy you flowers", "I'll be lovely"), their longeurs and simmering silences show us that relationships, like everything else, are hard work.

The Hamburg-based critic Jan Verwoert, who co-curated this show with a local team, the Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum, has said that he didn't want to make yet another biennial that tried to explain a city to people who already live there (someone should tell this to Liverpool, whose biennial falls for this narcissistic theme every time). Instead, Verwoert has focused on the changing nature of work, in which everyone is expected to perform all the time, to always be ready, to always say yes, "We live in a culture where there is no no any more," Verwoert has argued. Sheffield itself is going through a protracted, post-industrial redevelopment, and the city has said yes to this one-off project, by turns amusing and opaque, modest and ambitious. It is a laudable effort, if not entirely successful. Some of the art is terrible and some is self-indulgent, but whatever else it is, it is work; it's not lazy.

Later, reading Verwoert's thought-provoking and often entertaining thesis, Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform, in which Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rub shoulders with SpongeBob SquarePants, I learned that the painter Gerhard Richter keeps a sign printed with the word NO next to his telephone, to remind him how to respond to the demands constantly made of him. You must train yourself to say no.

A refusal often offends, but the alternative path leads to exhaustion and burn-out. Still, Verwoert argues, it is better to burn out than to fade away. Yet there is much to be said for the slackers, the jobsworth, the lead-singer and the carpet-sniffer. Hence Esther Stocker's posters plastered about the city, which read: "I regret that I am not in a position to accept your kind offer", and "This is quite out of the question for the time being."

No such diffidence or lack of commitment from the amazing Zheng Daxing, retired farmer, ex-soldier, one-time truck driver and bankrupt, who has formed a band using

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Three to see

Thomas Scheibitz
Cultural scavenger paints and sculpts life and death in the jungle of signs.
Camden Arts Centre, London: 020-7472 5500.

Rodchenko
The photographer invented a vocabulary for the modern world, dizzying and vertiginous.

Niki de Saint Phalle
Excessive, often dismissed French Nouveau Realist with a dark side.
Tate Liverpool: 0151-702 7400.

...negotiate a desert of sand on an L-shaped tabletop, by Nicole Wermers. There are stubbed-out cigarettes in the sand. It is a sort of spoiled emptiness. The conjunction of these three artists reeks of stalled purpose and regretfulness, and a sense of mourning for a lost modernity. It is the most memorable and succinct part of the entire Sheffield project.

I do not search, Picasso once said: I find. He couldn’t help himself from working all the time. He went to Sheffield once, in 1950, on his only visit to Britain. While he was in Sheffield, he had a haircut. If only the rest of the artists here had his zeal.

At Site Gallery, I came across a small white canvas with a few words in the corner; it didn’t appear in the show’s guide or on the gallery map. I pointed this out to one of the organisers, and she exclaimed: “It’s an intervention!” It looked like work to me. I found similar canvases at the Yorkshire Art Space, on a pillar in the Winter Gardens, and in a space where I fell asleep watching an exhausting video by the Danish artist Gitte Villesen. When I woke up, the painting had gone. Perhaps the pressure to perform had proved too much.

Art Sheffield 08: Yes, No, and Other Options is at various venues in Sheffield until March 30. Details: artsheffield.org

Zheng sings rockabilly versions of old revolutionary songs, as well as Chinese pub-rock anthems of his life and work under the red flag. The audience whoops and hollers while Zheng, a sort of errant Springsteen, a Yanjiang county Man in Black, drives down the road for the five-year plan. Xu Tan’s video of Zheng is mere concert footage, but Zheng, far from being a novelty act, comes over as the real deal.

Wolfgang Tillmans’ 2003 shot of Morrissey, stretched out on the floor of a recording studio and peering through a forest of mike stands, makes the singer look like a querulous panda in the zoo, performing what the guidebook calls “a moment of sceptical reflection as a conscious means of interrupting the pressure to perform”. Bullshit, is all I can say.

Jan Verwoert has said that he is attracted to emptiness and silence, the places where performance falters and attention drifts. Hence the videos here of Chinese artist Kan Xuan, in which the artist exclaims “Aha! Nothing. Shit! Nothing. Wow! Gee! Jesus — nothing. Shit, shit, shit — nothing” in a gleeful voice. On a small screen, the camera hovers over cracks in the pavement and holes in a wall. An army of ants treks by, I wonder what they do in their free time — how ants sabotage their slavery to work? In another video, Xuan noisily sifts through a bag of rubbish, pulling out used tissues,

instruments of his own devising.