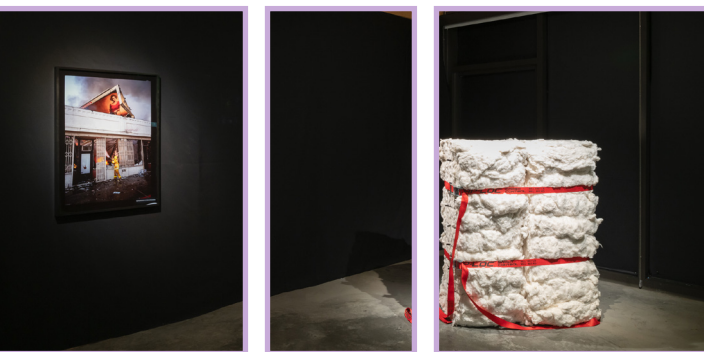


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If time is labor...we
are f%!*#d.



Installation view, *8 Hours of What You Will*, March 19–April 18, 2026, The Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Phillip Maisel.

By Jasmine Narkita Wiley

"Labor is on our mind was perplexing—it provoked. The exhibition challenged received notions about what an art space can be, what it can do. The program was in a perpetual state of change. Time folded. Time also took up space."

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What's the curatorial team at The Wattis Institute been thinking about?

Labor.

Like oil, labor is a resource—a human one. And working people inhabiting the planet are drained of their most valuable asset: time. Time makes the world go round. In her curatorial statement, Daisy Nam asserts that “Thinking about labor is like thinking about the air we breathe.” Labor is omnipresent. Labor is inescapable. Labor is totalizing.

So how did one team intervene in a theme that drives every aspect of our daily lives and social function? If thinking about labor is like thinking about the air we breathe, what isn't labor? Why labor now?

Labor is on our mind: 8 Hours of Work, 8 Hours of Rest, and 8 Hours of What You Will, organized by Daisy Nam, Diego Villalobos, and Jeanne Gerrity, with assistance from Zipporah Hinds, drew its name from a nineteenth-century workers' slogan and, like the phrase, unfolded in three parts. Aside from the courageous decision to embark on such an endeavor, what was most striking was that the exhibition shifted over time—an open-ended, always-moving format in which each act found nuanced ways of thinking about and intervening in the critical topic. With a commitment to experimentation, the research



Installation view, *8 Hours of Work*, October 29–December 20, 2025, The Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Philip Maisel.

program, now in its 11th season, excavated time not only as a subject but as a medium. Works included durational performances, participatory actions, video, sound, talks, lectures, screenings, and even an inflatable object. Contemporary art was placed in conversation with archival media, reminding visitors that the past has not passed and still informs our lives today. Rather than focusing on a single artist, the organizers turned to many artists, scholars, and modes of cultural production to support the theme. This decision echoed the people power that has led, and continues to lead, major labor movements. This coalescing revealed, as history itself has revealed, the potentiality of collectivity.

8 Hours of Work (October–December 2025), the first iteration, was a traditional group show in which each artist responded to the question: What is work? Aria Dean's *Two Cotton Bales Bound Together At 250lbs Each* (2018), a large mass of raw cotton tied together



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with cherry-red ratchet e-straps, sat at the corner of the gallery. Her work took a minimalist approach, functioning at the intersection of American history and commerce. Tania Candiani's *Camouflague* (2020–2025), in conversation with a 1946 photograph by Dorothea Lange of interned Japanese American women who produced nets to conceal military tanks, enlisted Wattis staff and CCA students to transform CCA's front gate into a woven display of labor. The collective action was a weaving of histories and an act of remembrance.

8 Hours of Rest (January–March 2026) took on a different pace with a solo presentation by artist Soil Thornton, who interrogated notions of rest, asking, Who gets to rest? *Husband Chair (Wattis)* (2026), an inflatable sculpture, took up space at the front door, forcing visitors to stop and instead enter through the back. The



Husband Chair (Watis), 2026. Vinyl stitched, velcro blower. 268 x 65 1/2 x 65 1/2 inches (6.8 x 1.66 x 1.66 m). Courtesy of the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York. Installation view, *8 Hours of Rest: Soil Thornton*, January 20–March 7, 2026, The Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Robert Divers Herrick.

title of the orange object probed the commercialization of rest and pointed to gendered moments of rest within the context of retail. The back of the gallery, now the entrance, was turned into a dark room and housed *A year's worth of calm soothing and restful at 15 seconds a day (According to color psychology, blue is the most calming color for the mind; pink is the most physically soothing and will leave you feeling swaddled. Green, the color of nature, is the least demanding of all the colors and is very restful on the eye)* (2025), a ninety-minute color video on loop, an invitation to rest.

8 Hours of What You Will (March–April 2026), the third and final installment of the season, marked a moment of reflection, a reconfiguration of the first two exhibitions, a group show, a way to look back at what had been learned over time. Opening night included a reading by Carol Becker from her new book, *A Time of Radical Imagining: California 1968–1978*. She shared thoughts on Jack Halberstam's theory on wildness, colonialism, and academic structures, and reflected on her time as an organizer of the United Farm Workers Union grape and lettuce boycott in California just as news of Caesar Chavez surfaced.

The three-part exhibition was as wide-reaching as it was conceptually rigorous. We were not met with pretty art objects—we encountered ideas, histories, movements, the quotidian. The research project indirectly posed

the question: What does labor mean in the context of an art school, a place where time is spent making work that functions as the antagonist to a system set on extracting our most valuable asset for its own benefit? Art school, a place where we are trained to make work that asks museum and gallery visitors for their time. The Wattis Institute is one of the few places where this kind of critical, open-ended inquiry into labor could happen. This theme is especially apropos in the context of the San Francisco Bay Area, where technologies created here, many designed to reshape labor and efficiency, send ripples around the world.

Labor is on our mind was perplexing—it provoked. The exhibition challenged received notions about what an art space can be, what it can do. The program was in a perpetual state of change. Time folded. Time also took up space. So why labor(time) now?

The elite is outsourcing this fundamental driver of economic production to advanced technology. We are living in an era when automation, algorithms, and artificial intelligence are changing our relationship to our most valuable asset. If nothing is free, what is free time, and how will our newfound free time be monetized just as all things are?

Labor should be on all of our minds. Time should be too.

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