

Good Work: The Absurdity of Labour in the Garden of Sisyphus

BY SETH WOODYARD

June 2012

Special thanks to:

Hannah Godfrey
Stephan Christianson
Monty Woodyard
George Dyck III

An Introduction to Good Work:

“Let us grant, first, that the race of man must either labour or perish. Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree.”¹ William Morris was not the first to make such an assertion, but he nevertheless develops, at the fin de siècle, in the face of the intensifying contradictions of industrial capitalism, a strong case for the value of labour and the necessity of the re-evaluation of labour’s crucial stake in the production of common wealth. The good life, in other words, is conceived by Morris as the social relations of the society of equality—relations of labour and love rooted in a radical commitment to the principle of good work.

Good Work is a multimedia installation combining architectural sculptures, video, and live performance in pursuit of the (im)possible construction of the good life on the basis of good work. *Good Work* aspires to a materially rooted, imaginative retelling of the Greek myth of Sisyphus by bringing into conflict several distinct but nevertheless interrelated narratives of love, labour, rebellion and rest. These narratives are: my personal narrative, the narrative of the work, and the narrative of Sisyphus. The resulting dialogue of slavery, sex, fraternity and the feminine, confronts embedded contradictions in masculinity, work, repetition, and ritual.

In his essay, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, Morris suggests that there are, in essence, two types of work, the one good and the other bad. What distinguishes the one from the other is that good work is animated by hope: hope

¹ William Morris. *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*. Penguin Books (Toronto, 2008), 1.

of rest, hope of product, and hope of finding pleasure in the work itself.² “It is manly to do the one kind of work, and manly also to refuse to do the other.”³ One could gloss over the uneasy masculine codes structuring Morris’s nevertheless productive assertion. But it has been the aim of this work to choose the more difficult path of trying to work *through* them, emphasizing and undermining the sexual violence of misogynistic social structures in pursuit of the truly beautiful. *Good Work* attempts to engage honestly with a fraught and fragile conception of masculinity that struggles to find expression through daily labour. In a culture steeped in cynicism and meaningless work, this installation is a turn to sincerity and hypocrisy that reveals the possibility of good work through the discipline of ritualized art.

² Ibid.

³ *ibid*, 2.

Chapter one: The Art of Myself

Making art is one means by which I begin to engage meaningfully with the world. It provides me with the opportunity to place my narrative within the context of history and culture and thereby be incorporated into a larger narrative. As a result, the work I make is rooted in my lived experience and is personal. With *Good Work*, I hope to acknowledge the tension between three distinct parts of my lived experience that, although related, do not often interact in my day-to-day life. These three distinct parts are my daily labour, my spiritual practice, and my art practice.

My day job as a drywall tapper and ornamental plasterer is not the most physically demanding job in the world of exploitative work, but it is incredibly repetitive and laborious. It is a very messy, dirty and dusty job, but the end goal is always a clean, smooth surface. Both the struggle and the power of the processes that define my work are constituted by their repetitive structure. My job requires me to work and re-work every area of a wall at least four times to bring it to finish. At times the repetition can be maddening, at other times it verges on meditative. The moments of meditation, I find, are more frequent the more familiar I become with the materials and methods of the work at hand.

Although the premise of drywall taping is rather straightforward—fill the seams and make it smooth—not just anyone can do a good job. I have met very few who can do a good job all the time. Producing a good finish requires a certain man who has a keen attention to detail and a certain feel for the wall.

The industry I work in is so dominated by men that in many ways the job I do requires of me the performance of a masculinity that I find both inspiring and disgusting. The industry attracts all sorts of characters, and I have met many remarkable men and heard countless unbelievable stories over the last few years.

This is to acknowledge that a construction site is not a gender-neutral space. It is a space that is overrun with male chauvinism, a space inhabited, built and maintained by men. There is a certain bravado that becomes a part of regular discourse when groups of men are all working in the same space together. It has been entertaining, and challenging to navigate and participate in such subtleties of manliness, some which inspire both feelings of guilt *and* pride. Although this environment has allowed me the freedom to embrace the rougher parts of myself, it has also made me question what it is that really makes the man?

I grew up as a non-ethnic Mennonite attending a Mennonite church in Ottawa. Although Mennonites struggle to understand the significance of visual art—they are traditionally iconoclastic and a very practical people—I learned, from my Mennonite upbringing, the importance of one's spiritual beliefs functioning as a practice that is lived out in the day-to-day. The influence of Mennonite perspectives also taught me the significance of community and the importance of each specific role within the community. Currently I am a member and chorister at an Anglican church. Anglican worship is significantly different from Mennonite worship as it is more formal, ritualized, and strictly follows the

liturgical calendar. What resonates with me in the Anglican Church is how meaning generated through aesthetic experience is played out in religious ritual. Anglicans pray the same prayers and perform the same actions repeatedly from week to week. Rather than these words and movements decreasing in significance through their repetition, their meaning for me has increased as they have become more familiar. Both the Mennonite practice of living out one's beliefs and the Anglican emphasis on liturgical worship require a certain discipline, something that is different, but related to, the repetitive discipline of the plasterer, the taper and the craftsman.

Something I have received from both my Mennonite and Anglican influences has been a deep appreciation for stories. It is a commonplace to say that stories help us understand who we are, where we came from, and where we might be going. In addition to these basic functions of narrative, I am interested in the mysterious nature in which stories from various religions and mythologies run parallel to one another, intersecting, and repeating one another. It is this promiscuous nature of myth to which I draw attention and flesh out with *Good Work*.

Chapter two: The Work Itself

The narrative of the work itself begins with its materials. With *Good Work*, I use common, low grade, and simple construction materials that I use every day in my day job: construction grade lumber, clear poly, drywall, plaster, and tarps.

When I first started working as a taper I entered into a world that is partially built, where the innards of architecture is still visible, where lighting is limited, and tools, materials and construction waste are discarded thoughtlessly about the space. I found a certain beauty in these half-constructed spaces, whether they be a home renovation where the extant structure transitions into the partially constructed; or, on a commercial jobsite where crews of men spend their days in cavernous concrete structures lit by temporary work lamps and where unfinished en suite balconies open freely onto tenth floor free-falls.

When I arrive at a new jobsite, the first thing I do is set up my work area. I lay down a blue nylon tarp to demarcate my mix area and hang a poly bubble around the workspace to prevent my mess from overrunning my own subjective limits. As my work progresses the space transitions into something new. Framed walls are sealed up, rough and damaged walls are made smooth, and an uninhabitable jobsite transitions into an inhabitable space. With *Good Work*, I take these materials I use every day, apply the same methods and techniques I learned from my day job, but implement them for different aesthetic goals. In response to the unusual, even mysterious, environment of the jobsites I find myself in, the initial, utopian impulse of *Good Work* is to forge together the sacred

and the laborious, to create a space that maintains the roughness of an unfinished construction project, while also encouraging contemplation, imagination, and rest.

The overall design of *Good Work* is based in traditional sacred architectural design. Sacred spaces, like many installation exhibitions in the world of contemporary art, are built with specific aesthetic and symbolic purposes in mind. There are a number of architectural elements common to the sacred spaces of varying religions. It is these intersections of sacred design that I appropriate and incorporate into *Good Work*.

A widespread reference point within sacred architecture of all forms is the human figure and its proportions. In this vein, the overall floor plan of *Good Work* is an abstracted depiction of a woman's body.

The first architectural element encountered upon entering the installation is the façade or gate. This wall with a passageway in its centre demarcates the line between profane outside and sacred inner space, a vaginal gate functioning as the passageway through which the viewer enters and exits.

After passing through the gate, the viewer encounters the fountain. Here, the fountain functions as the womb. Sacred spaces commonly include facilities for the act of ritual cleansing, or ablution. These are found in the Hebrew tabernacle and temple, referred to as the laver, and in Christian churches as the baptismal fount. Mosques contain fountains for ablution, and many Hindus believe in the sacred nature of rivers as sites for ablution, the most famous and

holy being the Ganges. The fountain in *Good Work* makes reference to each of these sacral cleansing practices while also referencing a boat, a coffin, and a simple bathtub. The movement between these points of reference, between ritual cleansing and vessels of mortality, is elevated to the level of symbolic rebirth, or baptism. The ritualized conception of menstruation forms the symbolic tie between fount and womb.

Beyond the fountain is the central element of the installation, which houses the dedicated workshop. This central area represents the torso of the woman and is based in traditional basilican design where a grand hall is divided into corridors, or aisles. In the Christian tradition this is referred to as the nave, (from the Latin for *ship*) whereas in the Muslim tradition it is called the *musallah*, or *house of prayer*. The ship-house in *Good Work* is divided into four aisles, separated by suspended curtains of clear poly. There are two outer and two inner aisles leading to the spiritual centre of the piece, the workshop.

Although the workshop is physically impenetrable to the viewer, she is able to see into the space through the semi-transparent plastic curtains, observing the work that takes place there. Like the *Holy of Holies* in the Hebrew tabernacle and temple, this is a place dedicated to the ritual work carried out by the officiant, or director of religious ceremony. In the case of *Good Work*, it is the site of a ritualized performance where I work for a week, mass-producing a large quantity of totemic figurative sculptures cast in salt. At the end of the work week, these salt-men offerings are ceremonially sacrificed by submerging them in the

fountain, where they slowly dissolve, transforming the water of the fountain into an unholy remnant of devotion: a symbolic mixture of blood, sweat, and tears.

The outer west aisle (on the right when walking into the space through the vaginal gate) contains a raised platform, or belvedere. Not only does this platform provide an alternate view of the installation much like a lookout at the top of a mountain, it is also reminiscent of a *minbar* in a mosque, from which the imam delivers sermons, or a choir loft or balcony in a church. As an intentionally reflective viewpoint, the belvedere draws attention to the function of spectacle within the concept of ritual, offering a point to consider the relationship between doing and seeing.

After passing through the ship-house, or nave, the viewer can enter two separate but identical gazebos. These two structures represent the breasts of the woman. Functioning as places of solitude within the larger sanctuary of the installation, they are reminiscent of Indian *stupas* and Chinese *pagodas*, freestanding tower structures that house the relics of Buddha. They also recall Greek and Roman *exedra* and Christian chapels, places for quiet contemplation, conversation, and prayer. Here, however, rather than relics, the gazebos each house videos of various repetitive tasks associated with my daily labour, ritualizing the repetitive nature of the work in the reproduction of life.

Following the two gazebo structures, the space opens into the end or head of the installation, like the chancel in a church. This area functions as the head of the woman's body. The chancel is the place in a church, traditionally at the east

end of the space, which houses the altar and sometimes the choir. This is the place where the sacrament of communion takes place. In *Good Work*, the chancel area opens to reveal a large screen upon which a video of a ritual cleansing is projected.

Chapter three: The Language of Symbols

A significant element of religious architecture is sacred geometry. Various shapes and proportions have been understood throughout history to possess specific spiritual significance in representing the harmony of the universe and the created order of the world. In *Good Work*, I make use of one shape in particular: the *vesica piscis*, Latin for “fish bladder.” The *vesica piscis* was understood by the ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras to be a particularly powerful shape. Explicitly vaginal, the *vesica piscis* is formed by the intersection of two identical circles. When the circumference of each circle intersects with the centre of the other they form a shape that resembles an almond or pointed oval. For Pythagoras and his disciples, this shape came to represent the sacred union of binary pairs of opposites, e.g. the heavens and the earth, male and female, life and death.

In Hinduism this shape is called the yoni, a stylized vulva used in religious art and as a maternity charm to celebrate and invoke the Great Mother’s creative, life-giving fertility.

Early Christians appropriated the *vesica piscis* as a secret symbol of Christ, what today is referred to as the “Jesus fish.” It was incorporated into the symbolic language of medieval Christian art as the *mandorla*, Latin for almond, and in architecture as the Gothic arch. In medieval depictions of the last judgment Christ is depicted inside a *mandorla*, representing an areola, a sort of full body halo. I first became aware of the shape through studying medieval art

history and was surprised to see images of Christ, brandishing a sword and riding inside of what appeared to be an abstracted female genitalia. I was disappointed to learn that Christ's *mandorla* is largely understood only as his sacred aura.

Part of what makes the *vesica piscis* so significant – the reason it has been incorporated into the visual symbolic language throughout human history – is its repetition in nature. Knots formed in wood make the shape of the *vesica piscis*. When you cut your skin the wound opens up in the shape of the *vesica piscis*. When paths are formed in the forest or through the snow and an obstacle blocks the way, the path splits around the obstacle to rejoin on the other side, forming the shape of the *vesica piscis*. The human eye, and female genitals also resemble the *vesica piscis*.

In *Good Work* I use the *vesica piscis* as a representation of female genitalia, both as an object of sexual desire, and as a symbol for rebirth through the repetition of ritualized labour.

With each of these various architectural and symbolic elements found in *Good Work*, I attempt to create a space that functions as a sanctuary, a place for contemplation and imagination. Gardens traditionally function as such places of reprieve and solitude. In various places throughout the installation there are groupings of giant hyssop plants growing out of white plastic pails, the same pails I use regularly to mix mud in and haul water for my day job.

Giant hyssop is a plant that grows native to Manitoba. It is related to mint, grows quite tall, and produces a delicate clump of pink or purple blooms. Hyssop is also a plant that has ancient medicinal and spiritually symbolic properties. Medicinally, hyssop aids with a variety of ailments including respiratory conditions, asthma, and anxiety.

Hyssop is the Greek word for holy plant. It was used by the ancient Greeks to cleanse their sacred spaces. There exist various biblical references to hyssop. In Psalm 51 the psalmist, David, mentions the plant, saying, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice."⁴ In the book of Exodus, the Israelites use hyssop to smear blood on the lintels and posts of their doors to prevent the angel of death from killing their firstborn sons during the first Passover. Hyssop is still used by the Catholic Church, added to holy water in various sacred cleansing rituals.

In addition to the various symbolic significances of each of the elements of *Good Work*, understanding the process of making the work is a significant part of understanding the finished installation itself. For me, the process of making art is often more significant than the actual finished piece. With a project such as *Good Work*, where the ideas of labour and birth are the symbolic core, this becomes even more important. The significance of each of the parts of the installation is not established at the get go, rather they evolve as I work through the process of

⁴ The Holy Bible, New International Version. Psalm 51:7-8. Zondervan Publishing House (Grand Rapids, 1996).

making. The act of working informs the ideas, just as much as the ideas inform the work. In this way, the creative process is a continual but worthy struggle to make sense of a mixed up world.

Chapter four: The Garden of Sisyphus

The myth of Sisyphus was incorporated into the narrative of *Good Work* at the mid point of its progress. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was damned by the gods to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain; once there, the stone would roll back down the slope under its own weight. Sisyphus was required to descend the mountain only to repeat the task for eternity. Sisyphus, who was king of Corinth and the most cunning of humans, was punished for being particularly crafty and knowing too much. On a number of occasions Sisyphus outsmarted the gods, eventually tricking his way into the underworld and putting death in chains, whereupon he returned to live on earth under the sun and by the sea. When the gods eventually caught up with Sisyphus he was captured and brought to the underworld, where his stone and mountain awaited him.

The myth of Sisyphus has become a significant narrative, through which I consider and contextualize my experiences as a labourer, in both the construction industry and the world of art. In his short book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus uses the Sisyphus narrative to illustrate his ideas regarding the absurdity of the human condition. Camus suggests that a realization of the absurd grows out of the conflict between a man's nostalgic longing for the world to express meaning and order and his experience of chaos, suffering and death. The absurd nature of our relationship to the world leads Camus to consider whether suicide might be the only appropriate response to such a realization.

Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering.⁵

Although Camus sees suicide as a reasonable response to a realization of the absurd, he suggests that it is possible, once one has become conscious of chaos, to be able to live within the absurdity of the world:

Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain, or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery.⁶

In the end, recovery, for Camus is the only option. To recover from a realization of the absurd is to defy the invitation to death and live a life of revolt. Although there is no great meaning to life, this does not mean that life is not worth living. Camus suggests that life can be lived “all the better if it has no meaning.”⁷ It is the “revolt that gives life its value.”⁸ To realize the absurd and commit suicide would be to accept the absurd. To realize the absurd and recover from it is to

⁵ Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Penguin Books (Toronto, 2005), 4.

⁶ Ibid. 11.

⁷ Ibid. 51.

⁸ Ibid. 53.

participate in a constant personal revolt, it is to challenge the world every second.⁹

Camus explains that Sisyphus exemplifies the absurd man “as much through his passions as his torture. His scorn for the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing.”¹⁰ Camus suggests that although Sisyphus is damned to an eternity of useless toil, it is through his consciousness of its meaninglessness that Sisyphus can craft his rebellion in the form of rest. It is on the descent, when Sisyphus turns to begin the slow walk down the mountain to where his rock lies waiting, that he is able to gain perspective on his world. He can, from the top of the mountain, look down upon the valley, see the world for what it is, and be conscious of his utterly absurd existence within it. “Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition...The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.”¹¹ Camus explains that if Sisyphus’ descent is sometimes performed in sorrow, it can sometimes take place in joy, as at the moment when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock and we must imagine him happy.¹²

⁹ Ibid. 51.

¹⁰ Camus, 116.

¹¹ Ibid. 117.

¹² Ibid. 117-119.

Camus' reading of the myth of Sisyphus fleshes out one of the primary contradictions revealed to me through the process of developing *Good Work* and expressed through a number of binary constructions embedded in the installation: reprieve or true rest, toil or work, coping or rebellion, reform or revolution. Is the answer to systemic inequality, irrational organization and lives of suffering really to ascend to a higher plane of consciousness while coping with the absurdities of our material existence? While *Good Work* flirts with the idea and experience of a higher spiritual and symbolic plane – encapsulated by the perspective offered from the belvedere -- I have tried also to cultivate a deeply material and utopian impulse toward more radical and collective versions of salvation. This is what it means for me to tarry in the garden of Sisyphus: to labour to keep alive the possibility of a work and a rest so long overdue to the toiling classes of the world.

Chapter five: Clowns in the Garden

A number of years ago my mother took me to an exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada entitled *The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown*. I have always had an affinity for clowns and the circus and I remember being both excited, entertained, and revolted by the works included in the exhibition. It is only more recently, upon revisiting the work through its exhibition catalogue, that I have been able to more clearly understand my confused response to the clown. In his essay “The Circus of Cruelty: A Portrait of the Contemporary Clown as Sisyphus,” Didier Ottinger discusses a shift in contemporary representations of the clown, both in art and in performance, from a sentimental, melancholy, fool of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, toward the wild, extravagant, rebel of contemporary art and the modern circus. This new clown has “intensified the traditionally carnivalesque inversion of values to the point where their extravagances give rise to an apparently meaningless chaos.” The modern clown, according to Ottinger, “is the stuff of myth. And as with myth, its significance is open, complex, and contradictory.”¹³

Ottinger draws a poignant parallel between artists such as Bruce Nauman, Paul McCarthy, Pierrick Sorins, Philip Guston and our absurd hero Sisyphus. One of the standard devices employed by clowns is that of endless repetition. This repetition serves as:

¹³ Didier Ottinger. “The Circus of Cruelty: A Portrait of the Contemporary Clown as Sisyphus.” *The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown*. Yale University Press in Association with the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 2004), 35.

an excruciating illustration of the fate that condemns humanity to repeat itself – the same mistakes, the same recurring illusions born of the same impossible dreams. Like Camus' Sisyphus, clowns express a condition of absurdity from which only awareness and feigned submission can offer any hope of emancipation.¹⁴

The modern clown, just as the contemporary artist who depicts him, has undergone an absurd awakening. His choice must either be for recovery through a continual revolt against that which he knows to be true and from which he longs for reprieve, or voluntary death.

Of Ottinger's examples of artists who represent the contemporary clown, the painter Philip Guston most clearly articulates the experience of the absurd awakening. Guston, originally one of the pioneers of Abstract Expressionism, created a stir in 1969 when he exhibited a series of paintings that, rather than depicting a pure abstraction, were linked more closely to the style of cartoons and comic strips. Guston had come to realize that "the ethical and political values that had historically justified and underpinned the modernist painting movement had had no impact whatever on reality and, worse still, had degenerated into an authoritarian aesthetic dogma." By employing a clownish style that combines humour with tragedy, Guston is able to articulate the inbred contradictions and struggle of the human condition, while underscoring the "fundamental ambiguity – the simultaneous grandiosity and ridiculousness – of any art that strives to be a

¹⁴ Ibid. 38.

vehicle of a social or political message.”¹⁵ Guston articulates his shift from a pure abstraction to an impure comic style as such:

When the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening to America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything – and then going into my studio to *adjust a red to a blue*. I thought there must be some way I could do something about it...I wanted to be complete again, as I was when I was a kid...I wanted to be whole between what I thought and what I felt.¹⁶

This is clearly an articulation of the absurd awakening, a point from which Guston could never return. In this way, not only the clown, but the artist who embodies him comes to play a Sisyphusian role within society. With somersaults and pie fights, exploding cigars, and maniacal laughter, the absurd artist applies to himself “the wisdom acquired long ago by Sisyphus, an art that allows itself to dream while recognizing the illusory nature of its dreams, that never forgets the weight of the reality it pushes up the slope, like clowns ever conscious of the huge shoes they drag around the circus ring.”¹⁷

If *Good Work* is a sacred space, it is equally so a circus ring, an arena within which the absurd nature of human existence might be played out. This is articulated most directly through the performative elements of the installation. For the main video component of *Good Work*, entitled *The Big Wash*, I commissioned

¹⁵ Ottinger, 42.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *ibid.* 43.

the Winnipeg independent, progressive, folk band Alanadale to write a new piece of music to accompany a ritualized performance of ablution. The resulting piece of music is an epic retelling of the narrative of Sisyphus where, after centuries of pushing his stone up the slope, Sisyphus eventually erodes the mountain.

Leaving his stone in its trench, in an act of absurd rebellion, Sisyphus recruits all the slaves and indentured servants of the world in a revolt against Zeus.

Sisyphus and his followers are unsuccessful in their revolt, but find rest through their deaths. The performance itself functions as both religious ritual and circus act, a sort of absurd Chautauqua.

The starting point for *The Big Wash* was in drawing a parallel between ritual ablution and the repeated act of a man cleaning his dirty body after a long day of work. For the labourer, a bath represents a turning point in the day. It demarcates the transition from work into rest. As we learned from William Morris in *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, an essential characteristic of good work is the hope for rest once the work is done. Similarly, an important part of a good life is the hope for rest, or death, once your life is complete. The absurd man scorns death, but is conscious of its inevitability. His rest comes in accepting the absurd nature of his existence and in living out a continual revolt against it. In this way the absurd man, the clown, and the artist lives a thousand lives and dies a thousand deaths. It is through the ritualized repetition of his labour that he eventually finds rest.

Conclusion

In *Gardens* (2008), Robert Pogue Harrison discusses how thought, vision, recollection, and reverie are brought about through the cultivation and inhabitation of gardens. A garden is grown through a constant nurturing, a labour that is carried out with and defined by care. Drawing from Hannah Arendt, Harrison explains:

Labour is the endless and inglorious toil by which we secure our biological survival, symbolized by the sweat of Adam's brow as he renders the earth fruitful, contending against blight, drought, and disaster. But biological survival alone does not make us human. What distinguishes us in our humanity is the fact that we inhabit relatively permanent worlds that precede our birth and outlast our death, binding the generations together in a historical continuum. These worlds, with their transgenerational things, houses, cities, institutions, and artworks, are brought into being by work. While labour secures our survival, work builds the worlds that make us historical. The historical world, in turn, serves as the stage for human action, the deeds and speech through which human beings realize their potential for freedom and affirm their dignity in the radiance of the public sphere. Without action, human work is meaningless and labour is fruitless. Action is the self-affirmation of the human before the witness of the gods and the judgment of one's fellow humans.¹⁸

¹⁸ Robert Pogue Harrison. *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. The University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2009), 9-10.

If *Good Work* is anything, it is the action of lament, consent, and rebellion. It is an articulation of a deeply rooted absurdity that exists within the relationship between a man and his world. It is the manly and comic revolt of one clown in the face of his struggle. It is an invitation to wander, to rest, and to reflect within the walls of the garden of Sisyphus.

Cultivating a space that aims to provoke a realization of absurdity can be dangerous work. I sometimes feel that the limits and contradictions of the masculinity performed in good work will render it not, as aimed for, to the level of Sisyphusian absurdity, but as something more violent, offensive, and unredeemable. This anxiety is, I think, a significant source of so much of the destructive side of manliness, as desire for the beautiful becomes twisted through the masculine repression of guilt. There is no doubt that as working men we are guilty of reproducing the world as it is in its broken form. However, I am proud to offer, in closing, a perspective that I have gained not through my art or spiritual practice, but through the co-workers I have laboured beside at my day-job: the deepest desires of men are profoundly directed toward the beautiful, so much so that we struggle to process and acknowledge that what we want the most is for the whole world to be reborn as woman.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Penguin Books (Toronto, 2005).

Harrison, Robert Pogue. *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. The University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2009).

Morris, William. *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*. Penguin Books (Toronto, 2008).

Ottinger, Didier. "The Circus of Cruelty: A Portrait of the Contemporary Clown as Sisyphus." *The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown*. Yale University Press in Association with the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 2004), 35-45.

Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. HarperCollins Publishers (New York, 1999).

Simmins, Geoffrey. *Sacred Spaces and Sacred Places*. VDM Verlag (University of Calgary, 2008).

The Holy Bible, New International Version. Psalm 51:7-8. Zondervan Publishing House (Grand Rapids, 1996).