

CRITICS' PICKS

## New York

**“After Hours: Murals on the Bowery”**

VARIOUS VENUES

134 Bowery–272 Bowery

May 7–July 9

As part of May's Festival of Ideas, the Art Production Fund and the New Museum invited eighteen artists to contribute murals on the metal roll-down gates protecting storefronts on what was once New York's most notorious skid row, the Bowery. The given parameters—the street's history, the works' placement, a limited public engagement—suggest rich site-specific interpretations, and the murals tend to negotiate the resistant intersection of concept and abstraction.

Near the corridor's southern extreme, Jacqueline Humphries's chamfered triptych echoes Decorative Hardware's awning above with loose, gestural abstract forms rendered in the store's palette of yellow and black. And on the north end, Glenn Ligon has applied a composition-book marble pattern in black and white to the gate of Worldwide Food Industry Equipment. In between, phrase-painting predominates: Elmgreen & Dragset's cheeky gate claims, in neon script, to be OPEN 24 HOURS; and Rirkrit Tiravanija's diptych repeats STOP WORK NEVER WORK, based on the 1953 graffiti “*ne travaillez jamais*” by Guy Debord. Whereas Tiravanija's blocky letters bring to mind the handpainted warning signs that might have adorned the gates under other circumstances, Adam McEwen uses a navy blue font on white ground to repeat one of his formulas—BEEN DOWN / DOWN SO LONG / LOOKS LIKE UP / UP TO ME—in which doubled words snag symmetrically to defy the easy legibility of the letterforms.

Conceptual art has always had a special relationship with the printed word. In a recent essay, Jan Verwoert characterized its performative difficulties as “inherent to the attempt to create a new artistic code for code-free communication.” The evocative, but inert, neutrality of these dislocated phrases seems rendered in such a code. Their occupation of the graphic free-for-all previously dominated by no-parking signs or advertisements exaggerates that estrangement. And despite their teasing allusions to the historical situation of the Bowery, their ambiguity also reifies the distinction between art-signs and street-signs, between the street as it exists now and what it once meant.

— Zachary Sachs



Elmgreen & Dragset, *Open 24 Hours*, 2011, mixed media, dimensions variable.