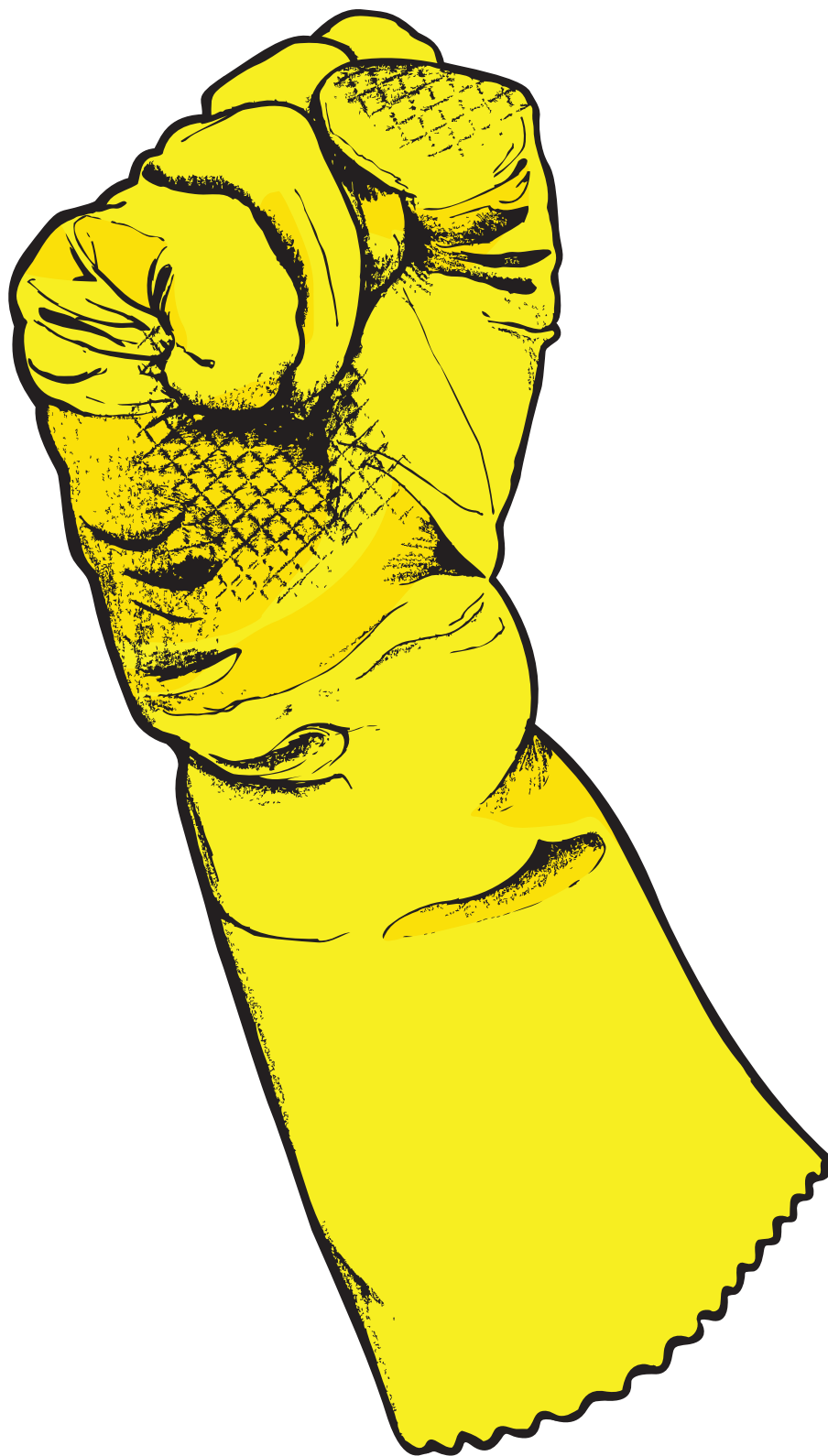
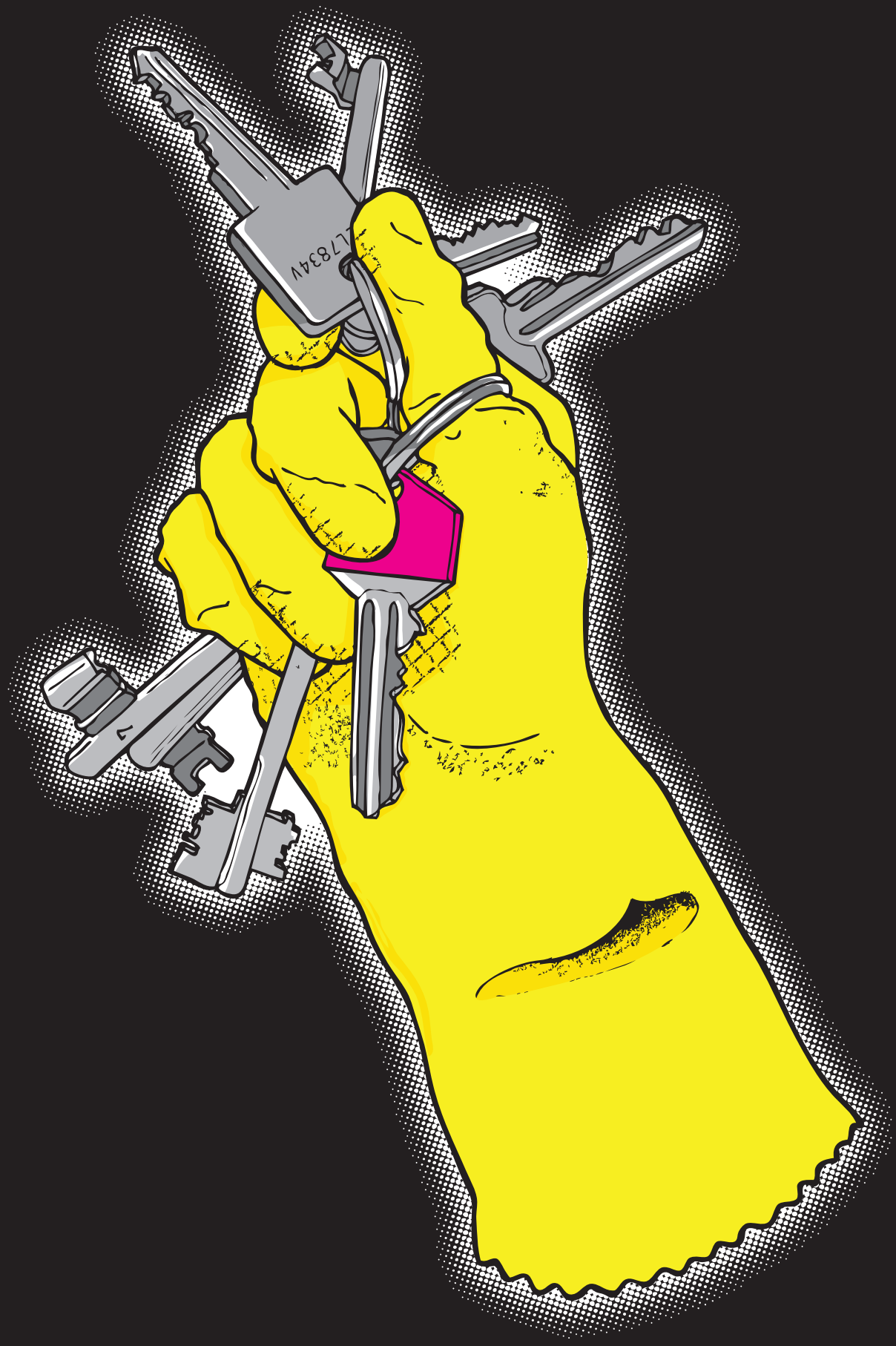


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Logo Union of Cleaners,  
designed by takeadetroit.eu



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Logo of the campaign  
*100.000 Families Vertrouwen Ons*  
designed by takeadetroit.eu

**Take a Risk and Explore:****THE VISUALISATION OF THE DUTCH CLEANERS' MOVEMENT****Cecilia Vallejos & Matthijs de Bruijne**

On a summer's day in 2011 a large group of workers gathered at the entrance of the headquarters of the Federation of the Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) in Amsterdam. The workers, all FNV members, were there to show their dissatisfaction with the negotiations for a new general pension agreement. It had to do with the way in which the union officials were handling the future of their pension.

In the same year there was also a severe clash being played out surrounding the workers' issues between the more radical and moderate union members. More important, however, was the background conflict between the idea of a union as a movement of empowered members or as one that functions as a kind of insurance company.

Around the FNV building there was a group of up to one hundred men and women all of whom carried protest boards with slogans such as, "Listen to us, Agnes". This demonstration forced the chairman of the federation, Agnes Jongerius, to emerge and face to the protesters.

The FNV headquarters are located on the outskirts of Amsterdam, in an area of employment agencies, accountants' offices, and insurance companies. Next to the entrance of the building is an abstract sculpture depicting a torso without a head or arms. This large stone figure, with its powerless spirit, reflected the tone of the workers' message—they were a voiceless and powerless presence in the union. The contrast of the monumental sculpture with the workers' powerful attitude produced a strange paradox.

As artists we asked ourselves what could have been a more representative work of art for the workers of the FNV and the entrance to their union? How could the role of active union members find a more accurate expression; a voice?



Sculpture in front of the Federation of the Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) in Amsterdam, 2012

**Organising**

On that day in 2011, the workers participating in the protest were mainly those of the Union of Cleaners. This small yet radical union played a key role in the conflict of the future of the FNV and its organisation of more than one million members.

Over a period of decades the FNV had changed from being an active workers' movement in Dutch society to a merely formal organisation that mostly delivered individual services to its members. This process of bureaucratisation transformed the attitude and character of the union member into a kind of passive client of an insurance company.

Structuring the union into a hierarchical company caused the workers' culture to vanish. All objects traditionally associated with Unions—banners, flags and other symbols made and kept alive by the workers—were gradually withdrawn. The images that once shaped their identity were replaced with concepts created by advertising agencies. Often, these agencies were the same ones that designed the public image

of the very companies employing the workers who belonged to the union. A neo-liberal corporate ideology had slowly begun to settle into the minds of both the union's officials and members. The union (and its identity) had shifted to a visual language that was connected to a corporate identity with images that did not represent the culture of the workers.

The Union of Cleaners was the first union of the FNV to conceive of a new strategy to organise the workers. In fact, they had to do this because, more than in other sectors, there was a dramatic decline in membership. There were two main reasons for this decline. First, more and more of the workers themselves came from migrant backgrounds (such as Moroccan, Turkish, and Surinamese). Some were second generation, some first generation. Most were disinclined, as was traditionally the case with Dutch workers, to join a union. Second, this outsourcing meant that the workers didn't really feel they belonged to the company they worked for. There was no bond, and therefore little or no opportunity to make a career within the organisation that employed them. They were categorised as cleaners by the company that outsourced them and that was that. There was a time when working for the railways as a cleaner could be the start of climbing the career ladder with the company. For the majority of this new group, joining the union wasn't seen as a necessary move to protect their rights as they were separated from the organisation they worked for; they were merely perceived as a new heterogeneous working class. So, in order to reach out to potentially new members, the Union of Cleaners had to get out of their offices and start organising themselves at the workplace instead of union headquarters.

Another fundamental change to the strategy was to make the structure of the union more democratic by giving power to the cleaners. The

implementation of this new way of organising, which originated in the workers movement of the USA, also included a search for an alternative visual language that adequately represented the actual identity of its members. For example, one of the characteristics of the cleaning sector was that the cleaners worked in empty offices or trains at night and were hardly ever seen by others. Because of this, and because they constituted an all but invisible labour force, the new form of representation had to be powerful enough to catch the attention of wider society.

One of the initiatives of this new way of organising the union was to invite artists, designers and illustrators to work with the cleaners. This re-activated the former connection between culture and politics, the link between artists and the trade unions that had disappeared towards the second part of last century. Through these exchanges with artists the different unions of cleaners were able to play a central role in their campaigns by producing their own images and slogans.

In the six years since these collaborations began there have been three major cleaners' strikes—the first in 2010 lasting nine weeks, the second in 2012 for fifteen weeks, and the third ten-week strike in 2014. After each of these protests, the cleaners' slogan, 'Nooit meer onzichtbaar' ('Never again invisible'), became more and more meaningful. The previously invisible cleaners had become visible. Having presented themselves as a self-aware working class able to improve their working conditions, they gained the respect of Dutch society. The efforts of this relatively small group of cleaners reinvigorated the spirit of the union as a movement.

### Domestic Workers

But the huge impact these cleaners made to the Dutch labour movement was in stark contrast with the hampered visibility of another sector inside the Union of Cleaners: the domestic workers. The dialogue between artists, designers and this group was particularly challenging since the conditions of domestic workers were different than those of other cleaners. They had neither standard contracts nor the possibility for a collective bargaining agreement for their wages. It was impossible for them to have access to health insurance and holidays. Their invisibility was attached to the fact that they work in a grey zone of the Dutch economy, not just because the majority of them lack residents' permits but also because the labour law of the Netherlands disregards domestic work as real work. As workers, cynically, the Dutch labour law placed them in a "regulated position" outside the labour market.

Due to this awkward position it was impossible for the group of domestic workers to apply the same strategies that other cleaners of the union utilised. The conditions surrounding the domestic workers required the use of more creative tactics initiated by the artists.

This was especially true considering that most of these workers were undocumented, which meant that a frontal campaign could turn counter-productive. In addition to this, the issues and claims of this group were bound to the regulations of the Dutch government and not to one or other problem with their employer. In fact the relationship they had with their employers was of mutual respect.

Consequently one of the tactics the domestic workers used when they came into action was to show their alliance with the people they worked for. The intention was to reach their employers' social group by entering the very places where they hung out—the domestic workers became artists and infiltrated an art space of a prominent art institution in Amsterdam. This step was possible due to the growing interest of the contemporary art world in "authentic socially engaged art." The curator who invited the domestic workers to make an art piece expressed this in a very clear and direct manner: "I am interested in you as [a] theme and you are interested in me for my platform. Do we have a deal?"

Perhaps now his words resonate, in some way, as bluntly opportunistic. But, in truth, this was the only honest proposition from a cultural institution in the Netherlands to the domestic workers who were repeatedly approached by other curators and art platforms.

### *You Are So Nice! Could You Work Two More Hours Today?*

Domestic workers work in an employer's home usually when the family members are out. This means these workers hardly ever see the people who employ them. They communicate through notes on kitchen counters or messages left on the fridge door. This form of written correspondence between the domestic worker and the employer was utilised for the exhibition they made with artist Matthijs de Bruijne. The artwork, *You Are So Nice! Could You Work Two More Hours Today?*, consisted of a collection of handwritten notes with messages for the museum visitors—one-liners such as: "I have 27 keys", "My goal is to pay tax", "We take care of your children", "Great that you are here to help us!", "My boss told me to not pick up the phone", and "You are so nice! Could you work two more hours today?"

With these statements, pinned onto a canvas made of familiar yellow cleaning cloth, the domestic workers brought into the view of the cosmopolitan art lovers their condition of invisible and irregular labour. But it was clear that the narrative of the domestic workers should also reach another audience, for instance the politicians who were unable to create a normal labour law for their sector. Or were the decision-makers in The Hague unwilling to do this? It is a fact that more than half of the domestic workers in the Netherlands came, and still come, from countries outside the EU. And



*Above*  
*You Are so Nice.*  
*Could You Work Two More Hours Today?*  
Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, 2011

*Following spread*  
Demonstration Union of Cleaners, Brussels, 2014



NL MOET SCHOON!

IS BEZU...  
IS GEEV...

WIEER KOOPT KRACHT  
BEZU IS G...  
ERK

WIEER KOOPT KRACHT  
BEZU IS G...  
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DE YAKBO...  
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OFFICES TO LET  
02 314 4900  
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DE VAKBOND VAN SCHOONMAKERS  
DEN HAAG



it is not their labour conditions but more the relation to their residential rights that makes the situation so problematic for politicians.

*Work No Pay*

In the production of the video *Work No Pay* domestic workers from mostly Asian countries were involved. Their cultural background influenced the choice of the visual language of this message for the politicians—shadow puppetry. On the one hand, this traditional storytelling technique was easily appropriated by the workers, and on the other, the Dutch were familiar with this art form because of the Netherlands' colonial past. However, in 2012 it was not puppets but domestic workers that performed as silhouettes. On video, the images of their shadowy presence allowed them to be portrayed without being recognised.

Over a month, as the headquarters of the FNV came to stillness in the afternoon, its huge meeting room transformed into a temporary rehearsal studio. The domestic workers met with a visual artist, an illustrator, and a dramaturge to create this video. For several nights the personal stories of the domestic workers were discussed and rehearsed in order to get the best descriptions about their situation in society as undocumented workers. The group invented their own methods to translate their daily working experience into short scenes—for example, re-enacting their daily routines working in the wealthy homes, commuting by bus, and explaining the difficulty they have in accessing the public healthcare service like every other worker in the Netherlands.

This process revealed that the domestic workers were more than just anonymous silhouettes performing. Together with dramaturge Cecilia Vallejos, the domestic workers devised the composition of the video sequences, condensing the narratives of their day-to-day reality with clarity and skill. More than ever, this process produced a way of working in which the dividing line between artist and worker was constantly blurred.

*Work No Pay* was part of the Domestic Worker's Union campaign launched in October 2012. They campaigned for the regularisation of domestic work in the Netherlands and against the criminalisation of undocumented workers. The name of this campaign was "100.000 Families Vertrouwen Ons". The free translation of this phrase frames a key question about Domestic Workers: How is it possible that 100,000 families trust the Domestic Workers, hand over the keys of their luxury homes, let their kids spend entire days with them, yet at the same time we should somehow see them as criminals?

Taking into consideration the fact that the Domestic Workers have a trusting and respectful relationship with their employer, the graphic designer Marnix de Klerk and the illustrator Nina Mathijsen created a logo of the Union of Cleaners especially for this campaign.

The upright yellow fist characterising the strength of the Union of Cleaners was adapted for the Domestic Workers as an upright glove holding a bunch of keys.

**Legalise Our Work**

The campaign boosted the confidence of the Domestic Workers. They marched proudly with heads held high through the streets—at last there was a sense of normality to their cause. Together with their employers they demonstrated in the cultural neighbourhood of Amsterdam with their new logo. They also carried protest signs reproducing the statements that were presented years before in their museum exhibition: "Your children grow up together with us", "Great that you are here to help us", and "Legalise our work." It was the first time in the Netherlands that these workers were able to make themselves visible as a group. This demonstration garnered huge media attention and resulted in Domestic Workers telling their stories on the front pages of newspapers and on the ten o'clock news. The Dutch government could no longer ignore their presence. Parallel to this, however, the growing presence of right-wing populism was breathing down the neck of the Dutch politicians. This pressure paralysed them in their process of thinking about how to regulate domestic work in the Netherlands. Because of this stalemate the Dutch government established a Commission with academics and specialists. And with this Commission a period of meetings behind closed doors and postponing techniques followed.

On a dark winter's morning in January 2014 the Commission finally came to the headquarters of the FNV to meet the Domestic Workers. As before in 2011 when the FNV members gathered to protect their future, the abstract sculpture at the entrance of the union now contrasted dramatically with the attitude of the Domestic Workers gathered to receive the Commission. Inside the building the Domestic Workers held up signs that read "Our employers respect us. What about you?"

With an attitude of indifference the members of the Commission sat in silence as they witnessed the speeches given mainly by the workers. Overwhelmed by the information, the Commission postponed any conclusive thoughts that day and went away. Even this encounter could not resolve the political stalemate.

*Words Of Labour*

Being undocumented creates an uncomfortable and stigmatised position for anyone in society. Therefore the Domestic Workers and the Union of Cleaners continue to apply pressure to the impasse of domestic work. The visibility this particular group had achieved needs new and constant articulations in order to be politically visible.

In 2017 the FNV published *Words of Labour*. This booklet details a number of essential

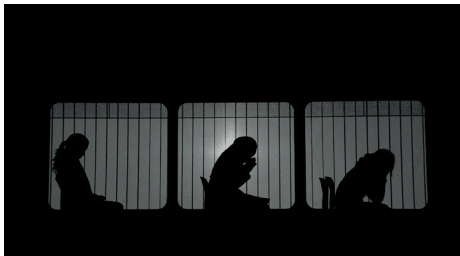
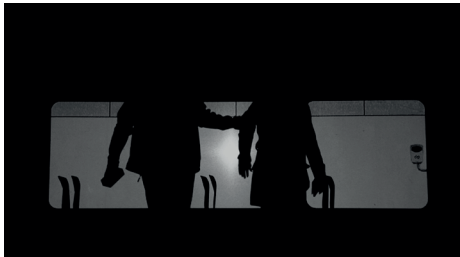


Above  
Video stills from *Work No Pay*



Demonstration 'Legaliseer Ons Werk', Amsterdam, 2013

terms with regard to decent working conditions, together with short testimonies from Domestic Workers. There is a story in this publication that relates in a compelling way how one worker puts her situation into perspective:



I don't allow any person or a card to define me. Because I believe there's more I can do than being undocumented. Some of our undocumented colleagues are very intelligent and very dedicated. But they allow their situation to limit themselves. I keep saying: "Hey, you shouldn't let a card define who you are, or limit where you want to go to. There are so many things to do here for everybody!" Yes, we are limited in a way, you cannot do whatever you want if you're undocumented. But there are many other things you can do. So, while you're waiting what your future is going to be, why not just take a risk and explore? This is actually what I am doing.

There is still a long way to go for the Domestic Workers to be recognised by the Dutch government. But the worker that once was represented by a static concrete figure with severed head and arms is today a vivid individual among many, thinking of the necessary narrative that can collectively change their labour conditions. To this end, creating a language of demand has more urgency than finding a single image to represent the attitude of today's workers.

The case of the Domestic Workers is proof that although their words have yet to create a change, together with artists they can articulate both their voice and their presence with objects that encompass the dynamic of their needs. The visualisation of a horizon for these workers calls for artworks that mobilise and interpellates the very conditions of their labour. In other words, it asks for artworks that move.

Photography; Matthijs de Bruijne