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Art, Labor, & the Absent Worker.

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ART, LABOR, & THE ABSENT WORKER

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT.

This thesis discusses the relationship between art and labor in twentieth century America. The document aims to briefly examine Karl Marx theory of estranged labor, Hannah Arendt’s essay on the human condition of work, and other philosophers such as John Ruskin and Jacques Ranciere, while discussing the relationship between art and labor. By giving a brief history of twentieth century art in reference to work and labor, I plan to excavate a deeper understanding of the relationship between Art, Labor, and the human condition of work. The example artworks both historical and contemporary will support the accompanying sculptural pieces and provide a framework to buttress my personal art practice. In conclusion, this document will lay the foundation for comprehending the complex association between Art Work and Labor while providing a context for a contemporary appreciation of the absent worker through art.
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INTRODUCTION

Work is essential to the human essence differentiating between man and animal while providing fulfillment in life. To create tools in order to produce other objects is unique to humanity and has allowed us to build a world that is tailored to our species by using these tools as force multipliers. Production, and the labor that goes into it has been the subject of theory for centuries. Karl Marx, possibly most famous for his theories of labor, production and other societal functions, is just one of the many philosophers that discuss the subject of work.

Art's relationship to work is complicated and complex, and continually evolving. This document will explore this relationship by discussing subjects of Man as maker, artistic production as unalienated labor, and the complicated relationship between art and work. Examples of my artistic practice, along with the work of contemporary artists within the last century will be used to support my research. The goal of this document is to examine the representation of labor in art through the lens of artist as unalienated producer. The goal of my sculptures is to employ working class values of practicality and functionality in order to create memorials to the unseen worker and celebrate the human condition of work while using work to understand the complicated relationship between Art and Labor.
HOMO FABER: MAN THE MAKER

_Homo Faber_, directly translated as “Man the Maker” was used by many theorist including Hannah Arendt, Karl Marx, and Benjamin Franklin. Homo Faber can be understood as “Man the tool maker” or “Man the fabricator”. Henri Bergeson refers to this concept to define intelligence in his 1907 writing entitled _Creative Evolution_ where he describes the concept as "faculty to create artificial objects, in particular tools to make tools, and to indefinitely variate its makings." This describes the human condition in direct relationship with work and making, specifically the creation of tools that facilitate the making of other objects.

Hannah Arendt theorizes about the transformative properties of work in her essay entitled _The Human Condition_. She describes how work allows us to create our own environment and transform nature. By embracing the notion of _homo faber_, making tools and the production of objects becomes an essential attribute of being human, separating us from animals. For this reason, the implementation of tools as symbols of the human condition has taken a central role in the sculptures I create as seen in Figure 1. These tools represent the unseen workers who create objects and constantly use them to build new products. In this way the tool is a symbol of humanity, personified as an extension of the workers body. It is the appreciation of these unseen workers that I hope to inspire with these iconic memorials to the contemporary laborer.
ART AND ALIENATED LABOR

According to Karl Marx, work is essential to being human. The work we do fulfills our species being and allows us to feel alive. It is a crucial part of human existence and the subject of many philosophers. Marx states in his writings on Estranged Labor,

“The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.”

Here Marx discusses the objectification of man’s species-being or human essence. He relates man to his product in a way that provides fulfillment in human lives. Yet the reality is that most workers are simply pieces of a larger puzzle and often feel disconnected from the products of their labor. Marx refers to this situation as estrangement or alienation of labor. Most extreme example of this can be seen in factories or Taylorization. Alienation disconnects workers from their humanity by reducing them to invisible cogs in a massive machine. Marx states the following in reference to the effects of estranged labor on the worker.

“...in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.”
Marx, Ranciere, and Ruskin have all theorized that creative artistic activity may be the only work free of alienation in a capitalist society. Ranciere equates artistic labor with the “highest form of existence and intelligence.” vi Marx insinuates that the antithesis of wage labor in a proletarian sense is free artistic production in which the artist feels an intimate relationship with their product and views it as a consequence of his/her self. In his blog, Reginald Shepard, editor of The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries discusses his understanding of the relationship of the artist to worker, referencing Karl Marx’ theories.

“The artist is exempt from the pressures of productive life. His labor activity derives from some transcendent yet uniquely individual source, wholly personal in origin yet universal in the significance of its outcome, the artwork, which is both the product of the artist’s labor as cultural worker and the tangible manifestation of his spiritual freedom (that is, of his free command over his own productive capacities). Whereas for the ordinary worker his labor is external to himself, the artist’s labor is uniquely his own. The worker denies himself in his labor; the artist affirms himself in his. The artist’s labor is not just the means to satisfy a need, but is itself the satisfaction of a need.” vii

Artists have been using labor as subject matter for centuries. Most notably in recent history is the labor art of photographers such as Lewis Hine. Hine is most known for his photos of children in work situations, Figure 3, that helped usher in Child Labor Laws in America. Hine also produced works of proud American laborers that seemed to blend into the machinery around them, figure 4. This conflation of the worker as a human being and worker as machine presents an interesting relation between the physical mechanisms and
the metaphorical machine in which the worker is simply a small cog in a large political contraption.

This approach to the relationship between art and labor is used as propaganda in order to create a pride in the jobs of the American work force while representing the American Dream. Photographs such as *Ironworkers,* figure 5, the famous photo of ironworkers high above New York City, presented these workers as the superheroes who work to build the cities infrastructure. Although I believe this relationship between art and labor is necessary, my work strives to memorialize and commemorate workers while using the tool to represent the human element rather than putting the worker on display for upper class viewing.

Art about labor has a responsibility to not exploit or simply display the worker. Using resources unnecessarily or irresponsibly is disrespectful the American laboring class who understands functionality and pragmatics to be fundamental to their existence. This creates a very clear formula for art about workers; the work must not deny functionality but rather embody practicality, must be conscious of the absent worker and represent them without putting them on display, must not be based in an economic reality that only implies a monetary value; and finally, the artwork must consciously present an aesthetic that gives identity to the invisible workers.

As consumers, we get further and further from production processes. Today people are distanced from the laborious processes that create and maintain our infrastructure, food sources, and everyday products. This creates an invisible workforce both nationally and internationally that is exploited and underappreciated. The absent worker and alienated laborer overlap considerably, and generally comprise the working class.
By avoiding material consumption and dedicating my sculptural endeavors to practicality and functionality, I believe my work can be an honest representation of the absent worker while also creating a conversation around the larger picture. This larger picture is one that conflates the worker as part of the mechanism but also as part of the material. By referencing the worksite and personifying the absent worker using tools, my work attempts to escape economic implications and allow each piece to return to its intended application and continue to work. Placing the tool in the gallery juxtaposes the invisibility of work with the high visibility of the gallery setting. A museum that was once inhabited by workers during its construction once again will host the worker but this time in the form of tools. The personified equipment, color palate, and overall composition create icons to labor and force the audience to consider the unseen worker.
ART AND WORK

Art is inextricably linked to work and work is of fundamental importance to art. The term artwork, used to describe any type of art from performance to sculpture is the most basic connection between art and work. By simply identifying objects as artworks and examining the many definitions of work, we make the claim that the act of producing art is directly related to labor. This compliments the overarching belief that Art actually does work, and is a positive and necessary attribute of our culture.

Arts relationship to the definition of work and its counterpart labor has been an evolution. Historically, the model for the artist was skilled artisans and craftsmen directly affiliated to the working class. It was not until the Renaissance that the idea of artist as intellectual individual was born. Following that, the Industrial revolution replaced skilled craftsman with mechanical reproduction. With this shift from anonymous craftsman and artist guilds to artistic genius and intellectual, the artist has been removed from the working class and distanced from the proletariat.

If we are to consider art as a possible representation of labor then we must first consider the representations of labor in an art historical sense. Over the course of the 20th Century, many factors have affected how labor has been represented in visual culture. This relationship extends much deeper into history and much further than only America, but this limited history will focus on the representation of labor in 20th century America.

As America’s Industrial Revolution progressed full speed in the late 19th century, the immigrant population filled jobs and comprised the majority of our workforce. Photographers such as Lewis Hine and Margaret Bourke White provided even more glorification of the worker. Most notably, the photos of ironworkers dangling high above
the city were most responsible for not only shedding light on the danger of being an ironworker, but also became a formidable argument for new safety regulations.

“Hine was a sociologist who initially used his camera to promote social reform and is best remembered for his photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island, New York, and of children laboring in coalmines and textile mills. He later concentrated his photography on Americans on the job, especially when that job meant working with machinery, hoping to, depict the true dignity and integrity of labor.”

These propagandistic photos established a national pride and a dedicated workforce that believed in what they were doing. The entire population especially the working classes looked upon artistic representations of labor as icons devoted to work like theirs. Although propagandistic, this type of photography was consequently commenting on the relationship between art and work using photos as a vehicle to represent labor and instill a national pride for work. Iconic images of work have disseminated into many aspects of the working class and can be seen today in strike signage, bumper stickers, and union logos that support pride in unions and labor.

Also during the beginning of the century, the literal depiction of work manifests itself in art by depictions of idealized workers such as the oil painting by John Ferguson weir, *Forging the Shaft; A Welding Heat*, Figure 6. This painting embodied the strength and majesty of human labor. The memorialization of labor through these and other artworks displayed unglamorous work in a proud and strong manner. Large-scale bronzes elevated the industrial toils to godlike proportions in sculptures such as *Mechanics Fountain*, Figure 7, by Douglas Tilden. Located in San Francisco, this sculpture was created to inspire the city to rebuild itself after the earthquake of 1906. Iconic photos of the sculpture show the
muscular men still standing tall operating the press as they are surrounded by the ruins of the city.

In the 1930’s Franklin D Roosevelt the close advisor Harry Hopkins created the WPA or Works Progress Administration. The WPA was formed in order to provide employment and recovery from the Great Depression. This government sector provided eight million jobs during its peak in 1938 and included the construction of civil projects, such as roads, bridges, and buildings, along with other realization of parks, public sculpture and murals. Many of the results of this can be seen today as public buildings and everyday infrastructure.

A small part of this administration was dedicated to art entitled the Federal Art Project. The programs included community involvement and education of the arts. The public aforementioned public sculptures and murals were also part of this program and can still be viewed in post offices or city halls across the country. Employing over 5000 artists at its height, this sub organization to the WPA demonstrates that for a time, the governing bodies felt an investment in the arts to be of value and importance. This direct relationship between public works and art works provides another viewpoint to understand the relationship between art and work. Thanks to Harry Braverman, who believed that “to make pictures was not work,”* The WPA and the FAP were dismantled, as the workforce was needed for World War II in 1943.

A more contemporary example of how artists relate to the working class and labor itself can be understood through the Art Workers Coalition developed in New York in the late 1960’s. Although preceded by the American Artists Union, the Art Workers Coalition combined their leftist political agenda with the strategies of the trade unions. Prior to this
era, philosophers considered the working class to be agents of change. Theoretically, the working class in critical mass would have the power to make change, and artists of the AWC intended on aligning with these ideas. As I later discuss, the agents of revolution have migrated from working class to intellectuals, namely students and artists.

This Coalition was formed with change in mind. Basing their manifesto off of theorists such as Karl Marx and Herbert Marcuse\textsuperscript{xii}, high profile artists including Carl Andre and Robert Morris demanded they be recognized as workers. As a union, they called for museum reform, rights to intellectual property, and payment for the work they did.\textsuperscript{xii} This is an example of the way in which artists of this time perceived themselves as workers, and another lens for understanding the complicated relationship between art and work.

Although some issues on the AWC’s agenda surrounded art workers rights and museum transparency, the relationship to the working class labor unions ended there. Much of the AWC’s events parallel student activists groups rather than trade unions. The New York Art strike was in response to the Vietnam War as well as other issues on the AWC’s agenda. Antiwar protests and political activities involved artists and students rather than artist and laborers. For instance the anti Vietnam War protests of the 1970s and Kent state shooting protests were hundreds of students.\textsuperscript{xiii} More recently, activists and artists together as intellectuals comprised the protest known as Occupy Wall Street. Art critic Ben Davis talks about his experience in this and other political activities and how much it influences his thoughts. “It was the experience of taking part in actual social movements – aggravating, difficult, humbling, inelegant, but ultimately worthwhile…”\textsuperscript{xiv}

The relationship between artist and workers was literally beaten down during an event in New York forever known as the Hard Hat Riots. On May 8 1970, in Lower
Manhattan, a group of around a thousand students gathered to protest the Kent State shootings along with the War in Vietnam. Peacefully protesting at the intersection of Wall Street and Broad Street, the students were visciously attacked by construction workers who were mobilized by the New York State AFL-CIO, or American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. During the attack, workers beat protestors with hard hats while prioritizing attacks toward the longest haired students. Police were outnumbered and unable to do anything, and criticized for this later.

The situation created serious tension between the members of the AWC and conflicted with Morris and Andre’s strategy of affiliating with the working class under the title Art Workers. The implementation of union strategies as a revolutionary force in the art community was tainted with violence. Almost simultaneously the AWC fell apart, but not without some positive influence. The idea of intellectual property and the beginning of museum free days were a direct result of AWC actions and can be still appreciated today. Free Museum Day spread internationally in an attempt to break down the elitist barriers that continue to exist in the art world.

Despite the separation from the laboring classes, artist continually attempted to align with the workers. Although this became problematic, it is a relationship that is worth researching and understanding. Few artists embraced the idea of the Art worker more than Robert Morris and Carl Andre. Andre, whose father was a bricklayer, had a deep appreciation for the working class and a bond with industrial materials as you can see in his work such as the equivalents as shown in figure 8. Robert Morris constantly embraced his identity as an art worker. During the installation of his works and exhibitions, Morris
became just one of the workers, seen often with gloves, donning a hardhat and cigar in his mouth. See Figure 9

Morris’s work is recognized as some of the most minimalist sculpture, which by definition contrasts Morris’s position as an art worker. Philosopher Richard Wollheim coined the term Minimalism in 1965, describing art that employed “a minimal amount of work or effort.” Minimalism chose to negate craft and skill while eliminating the abstract expressionist notion of artist touch or personal style. While this notion creates further separation between artist and worker, the denial of labor in these works resulted in an artistic production of clean, neat highly refined sculpture. As presented in Figure 10, Morris’s works are very simple gestures yet highly refined. This creates a contrast between minimalism’s original goal of minimal amount of effort and information. Creation of perfect forms inherently takes very serious skill to produce. This creates a contention between negation of craft and the production of the actual sculptures.

Minimalist sculptors almost always designed the work and commissioned the fabrication. Movement from artist studio to factory production presents a new relationship to labor that more closely resembles the craft guilds that preceded the Industrial Revolution. Now artists were designing the work, while skilled professionals produced the works. Many artists found this difficult to be separated from their work and sought out an industrial setting that would allow them to remain a part in the realization of their work. This spot was filled by The Lippincott Factory dedicated to the realization of large-scale sculptures in which the artist was involved as the project manager and allowed to be present on the factory floor. Artists such as Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, and others used Lippincott’s services and took the opportunity to be photographed with the work in
progress in an industrial setting. See Figure 11. This creates both a connection and disconnection between the artist and workers while further securing artist as designer or foreman and not worker.

Minimalism is iconic of the mid to late 20th century and crucial to setting the stage for contemporary art. The idea of a minimal amount of information and minimal amount of work challenges the audience to reconsider how we define art, and presents an excellent crossover between art and labor. Theories of minimalism contest the notions of skilled craft but also support it by demanding the perfection of a machine finish. By handing the work over to factories operated by working class Americans, the artist as intellectual is admitting that they do not possess the skills to realize their work. This puts the production of art back into the capitalist system in which the workers will see no benefit or connection with the product they labor over. Minimalism and its troublesome relation to workers have further conflated this contrasting relationship between art and work.

Art is an undeniable form of work both physical and mental. The relationship between artwork and labor are disconnected yet have emanated from similar backgrounds of skill and craft. Art and work continually cross paths both historically and currently but this relationship seems more distant as time passes. Intellectual toil replaces physical work while outsourcing fabrication substitutes material knowledge and craftsmanship. As an artist who hails from a working class American family, I feel it is necessary to remain connected to work in order to be true to oneself while embracing the role of artist as intellectual laborer. John Ruskin comments on this exact predicament saying,

We are always in these days endeavoring to separate the two [the intellect and manual labour]; we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always
working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the
workman ought often to be thinking and the thinker often to be working, and both
should be gentlemen in the best sense.”xvi

My work is dedicated to the working class and the individual works act as
memorials to labor and the working class itself creating conversation around the subject of
art, labor, economy and work. With one foot on each side, worker and intellectual, my
personal identity has been defined by the complicated relationship of artist and worker in a
class based society and I believe that a healthy balance of the two is necessary.
ECONOMY OF MEANS

Economic implications of art are something most artists are conscious of. How sellable is the piece? Is it shippable or transportable? Is it likeable to the point that someone would want to own it? Is it even capable of being owned, or is it more temporal and experiential? How much money went into the work? How much is it WORTH?

These are all questions found hiding in the back of our minds while making. Whether we understand how it affects our efforts is another question altogether but understanding where our work sits in a contemporary global economy is something we need to consider as artists. Not simply knowing the carbon footprint of the artwork or how much time and material has been injected into the piece, but rather what we as the artists are confronting by attempting to place a monetary value on such an obscure creative activity.

Many artists use these issues as a starting point for their work, critiquing the art market, shedding light on the massively stratified economic situation of the art world (or world in general), or even simply pointing fingers to environmental impacts of industry or personal activities. These are all relevant topics, but I believe it to be more powerful to attempt to escape the economic implications of your work and in this way, critique the system from the outside.

My current art practice and the series of sculptural interventions that coincide with this document revolves around the aesthetic of American labor, see figure 2. Many people navigate through or around construction sites every day and fail to recognize the inherent beauty that is developed by work. The tools, machines, material, and overall chaos create a short-lived beauty that sprawls across the construction area and litters both rural and
urban spaces. Whether along the highway, next to your work or school, or as an interruption to your walk in the park, construction sites signify progress in a functioning economy, creating jobs and pushing the urban environment through a constant evolution.

Art movements such as Arte Povera were centered on the necessity of being economical. These artists pursued their sculptural interests by any means necessary, using common materials and low cost industrials. The goal of these works is to push this idea even further and keep the work from being caught up in the monetary system. My intent for these sculptural interventions is not to be bought or sold and therefore will never enter into the economy whether that be art market or real world economy. Each tool will return to its original job and continue its life as an extension of the absent worker and allowing each tool to produce to its fullest potential.

This thought is frightening to many artists and understandably so. The idea that your work may not sell is scary enough to make one question the amount to time and money invested in the activity of art production, let alone intentionally creating work that is not to be sold. Artists are trained in the art of creative problem solving and this situation poses yet another problem. Can we sustain ourselves as artists by using our talents while allowing our artwork to remain untethered to the market economy? Ideally without this notion of monetary value tied to success, we can measure success by the ability to sustain our careers with other endeavors while continuing to create work that does not rely on being bought or sold.

The deficit between upper and lower classes in society as a whole is very similar to the art market, where very few artists comprise the majority of profits. Superstar artists make unbelievable amounts of money while most artist specifically emerging artist
struggle to make any at all. Without another means of income, most working artists are lucky to have the luxury to follow their creative endeavors. Considering the facts and likelihood of success, a career as a full time artist seems nearly unachievable. By combining the issue of monetary success with the necessity to be practical and respectful to the object in my assemblages, I feel that it is necessary to escape the market by creating sculptural interventions and quickly releasing the tools back into their native worksite.
INTERPRETING MY PRACTICE

The pieces are on a temporary hiatus from their natural environment and function. Each piece of the sculptural puzzle had an original value when it was purchased yet as soon as it becomes a specific workers tool, it has transformed in value. The tool itself in combination with the human elements, has the potential to make money and complete tasks. In other words, once the tool is in the hands of a worker, it has a priceless potential to do work.

The parts that form the whole of this sculptural intervention are held in tension with each other for a brief moment. To render these tools non-functional by manipulating them or modifying them would disgrace the work that the tool has already been a part of and has the potential to do. The intention of this body of artwork is to create objects out of many pieces that gather together to make a form and shortly thereafter, return back to their work environments to do what they were made to do.

Each piece is at a different stage in its life of production and it is evident in its form. Some are well used, with a thoroughly developed patina of wear, others just beginning their journey as an extension of the American worker. Machines and tools, specifically hand tools need a certain degree of wear or use before they operate to there full potential. This is known as “break in.” From the moment the tool has been presented on the jobsite, it begins a journey of wear. The layering of concrete, dirt filled crevices, and worn down handles all create an aesthetic of use that cannot be replicated with anything but real time and real wear.

By bringing many singular tools into one assemblage, the sculpture is paying tribute to the absent worker by personifying each object. This situation parallels that of the union
or modern workforce. Each tool represents a human counterpart that is essential in accomplishing any task. Each tool is just one piece of the puzzle and provides one small function in order for the sculpture to work. If one piece is removed the assemblage may fail. Each piece forms a whole and creates the critical mass necessary to be a one solid unit, mimetic of the way many workers in a union create the strength necessary to demand power.

Tools, and the relationship we have with them is reflective. The tools become a metaphor for our lives, beginning as clean shiny objects in good health, and deteriorating with a patina of age. Tools are much like another appendage, extensions of the body becoming a part of us. The uniqueness of tools to human kind and our relationship with them provides a physical representation of work. These sculptures employ tools to represent the absent worker as an extension of the human body. Work, tools, and art are all definitive characteristics of humanity, evidenced in my artworks.
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