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On Autonomy: Personal Agency Under Late Stage Capitalism

BFA in Studio Art with a concentration in Sculpture

College of Art

Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract:

Personal agency is the feeling of control over one's actions. Capitalism is deeply etched into the fabric of America and the world at large. In this paper, I propose that late stage capitalism has forever altered the means by which personal agency manifests, that it has left no room for alternatives on account of its far-reaching scope. My work, through its subject matter and medium, refers to the lack of autonomy under escape or embrace of capitalism. Failure and futility are both key ideas, as complacency is intrinsic to our current moment, which is evocative of the ongoing metamodern art movement.

The Kickapoo Turnpike: The American Dream is Stepping on Itself

About a year ago, a friend from my hometown Norman, Oklahoma, sent me an instagram reel video which opened with a still shot of a McMansion¹ being torn down. He sent it because we'd come across the McMansion just out of town several years prior and found it especially hilarious— It featured too many castle-like architectural features to count, the private pool had three layers of fence between it and the road, and all the house's renovations were done to the front facade. After the demolition shot, the video propagated its core message: that Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt was destroying the American dream, as he had recently approved the development of the new Kickapoo Turnpike to be built on rural properties. The decision is what destroyed the McMansion.

The video was created by one of a large mass of McMansion owners, those being typically caucasian, wealthy, conservative people, who had mobilized to form a grassroots movement called PikeOffOTA² that opposes Kevin Stitt's decision over the issue of land repossession *in Oklahoma*. Given Oklahoma's notable history surrounding the land repossession³ of Native peoples, I obviously found the overall indignant character of the now-anti-turnpike group a touch obnoxious. What sticks most with me now is not their obvious hypocrisy, but the realization that Americanism knows no bounds in our current age. Where PikeOffOTA got it wrong was when they claimed that Kevin Stitt's decision stood in the way of the American Dream, as the turnpike was an extension rather than a disruptor to it.

¹ A colloquial term used to describe mass-produced homes marketed to the American upper-middle class. The homes are typically made inexpensively yet they adopt architectural features associated with wealth.

² Oklahoma Turnpike Authority.

³ Stealing, theft, robbery, violence, etc. Injustice too large to detail.

I now view the McMansion dilemma as the beginning of my current sculptural art practice, not because it inspired me to create the work *Kevin Stitt's Unlikely Foe*, a six and a half foot tall drywall form which recalls the garish appearance of the McMansion, but because it marks my first interest in a lack personal agency as a result of late stage American capitalism. Personal agency is the feeling of control or authority over one's own actions. In my current work, I propose that capital hinders this sense of personal agency.



Fig. 1. Levi Gentry. *Kevin Stitt's Unlikely Foe*, 2022.

Who Needs Vegas? (Strip Mall Hideout): Is Escape Possible?

In *Who Needs Vegas? (Strip Mall Hideout)*, I further delve into the relationship between capital and personal agency. The work is a recreation of a strip mall from my hometown which features a Days Inn motel, a family restaurant, and a relatively newfound marijuana dispensary. It has an oriented strand board⁴ rectangular base, with three rising steel and painted wood forms which resemble large freeway signs. The signs read 'Days Inn', 'POT', and 'Jimmy's Egg'. Atop the base is a salt and corn syrup crumbling form which resembles a strip mall under the signs.

My mother has continually made the joke that someone could stay at the real strip mall in Oklahoma and never leave, as the strip mall features lodging, food, and entertainment alike. The work suggests that even if one were to flee and hide out at the strip mall compound in an attempt to find solace from the outside world, then they would still be contributing to it, as it is impossible to escape the grip of capitalism in our current age. The strip mall is a perfect example of late stage capitalism in our current moment on account of its idyllicism and widespread decay, the use of this symbol imparts an ironic embrace. The work investigates my desire for self-sufficiency while questioning the potential success of that search.

Who Needs Vegas? (Strip Mall Hideout) is also a metacommentary to my art practice. My work, though it critiques capital, is only able to accomplish this as a work of art which ostensibly exists in the art market. Its materials could very well be sourced from a similar strip mall— Its logic is circular, it is a self-deprecating proof of concept. This critique manifests in the sarcastic aura of the piece, the signs are painted by hand with a childlike idyllism despite the mediocrity of the places they represent, the work

⁴ Which I will henceforth refer to by its abbreviation 'OSB.'

actively undermines its own subject matter. This can also be understood through the materiality of the work, the materials which make it up are highly commodified, such as the OSB, table salt, and corn syrup. These materials remind viewers of the commodity that is the art object itself— though my work actively relays a situation of attempted escape from capital, it in turn represents my attempted escape. It is only able to critique the art world and capital by contributing to them.

“... just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc... So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a ‘totally administered society,’ or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.”

—Andrea Frasier, *From the Critique of Institutions to An Institution of Critique*

This ‘failure’ is key to understanding my work in the escape from capital. Just as the supposed strip mall visitor is not able to escape in any real way, my artwork is inherently unable to escape its institutionalized being. As an academically trained artist, I am forever unable to revert my relationship to art as a greater institution. Any further action of mine exists as the product of the art world. In my next work, I double down on my artwork’s position as a tool of capital, and consider the role of complacency within the above paradigm.



Fig. 2. Levi Gentry. *Who Needs Vegas? (Strip Mall Hideout)*, 2022.

No Outside Coins Allowed: Introductory Comments

No Outside Coins Allowed was created in response to a screenshot of a 4chan post that featured an aquaponic shrimp farm that the anonymous post creator has constructed in what appears to be their basement or some other dingy subterranean space.⁵ This mysterious figure describes the economic advantages of this operation, as it is apparently a relatively passive form of income, but what the creator has failed to realize in their attempt to avoid a standard nine to five scheme is that they were actually just starting a small business. Their attempt to escape and create self dependent capital only doubles down on the ethos they attempt to evade. With this new work I ask the question: Does the protest of capital only further enforce it?

Though *No Outside Coins Allowed* is likely best described as a performance work, it may also be described as an site-specific interactive sculpture or even later a video work. The artwork features a built OSB coin donation funnel which is some five feet across and two and a half feet tall. Next to it is a small folding table which is akin to a child's lemonade stand equipped with a credit card reader. Above is an OSB sign that reads 'COINS \$1.00 EACH'.

Participants may deposit quarters, which must be purchased at the nearby coin sales booth, into the coin donation funnel, only for the quarters to mockingly clink at the bottom of the funnel. They are unable to get them back. Manning the booth is my friend Tim, who loosely resembles me, sitting with an expression much like a teenager working a boring summer job. The quarters are sold for one dollar rather than their supposed worth, that being twenty five cents.

⁵ The post creator proclaims that "It's like being able to scoop gold right out of a kiddie pool." For the record, I do not agree with the harmful language used by the post creator.

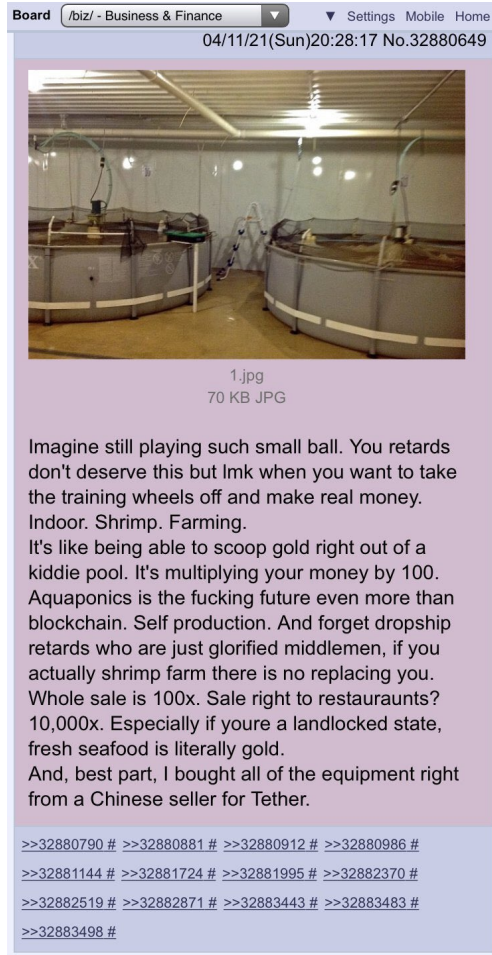


Fig. 3. Unknown. *Anonymous 4chan post*. 2021.



Fig. 3. Levi Gentry. *No Outside Coins Allowed*. 2023.

No Outside Coins Allowed: Interaction-Agency Paradigm

No Outside Coins Allowed now exists as a physical sculptural object and performance, but will ultimately result in its final video documentation of the performance. To create the work's final documentation, I will edit a short video featuring recordings of the performance, and broadcast it on Twitch⁶ for another computer to screen record. This screen recording will be the final iteration of the work, it will be a multi-layered digital remnant of the past. The artwork overall is a clear critique of capital, but its multiple states also pose different levels of interactivity or personal agency in relation to the final work. For instance, those purchasing a coin have the greatest amount of initial autonomy, though they bear no accountability for how their likeness will later be demonstrated. On the contrary, I have great impact on their final representation, though during the performance I had no say over whether they purchased a coin, how they rolled it, etc. Just as I was subject to their intended participation with the work, they are subject to my participation with their recorded actions. Both sides, mine and theirs have an inverse relationship when forming the final work.

“... audiences can recall specific images and sounds for works they have witnessed in person, and others who did not see the original work can trace memories of particular events... to gain an understanding of something that would otherwise remain unknown to them and their peers”

—Toni Sant, *Documenting Performance : The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving.*

No Outside Coins Allowed synthesizes the above paradigm of viewing performance work to impart varying degrees of knowledge and agency in participants. As each form of the work transfers through its aforementioned successive stages, participant or performance viewer agency diminishes, though my overall scheme

⁶ A popular streaming platform. Commonly associated with gamer types.

becomes further revealed. This is reminiscent of George Kubler's writing in *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, in which Kubler writes that interpretation is never immediate, it is always after the fact (Kubler 17). My work uses this critical information-immediacy relationship to suggest the ulterior motives of capital, as the parameters for interaction with this system based artwork predicate upon the extortion made possible under a capitalist system. As Tony Sant notes in *In Documenting Performance : The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, the inherent distortion that occurs with the documentation of performance art, as "Whoever is capturing a live performance through one or more video cameras is making an interpretation of what is happening, understanding the potential of the performance through their own perspective and personal sensibility", this means that the implication of outside augmentation is baked into the documented performance format (Sant 24). Interacting with the piece requires participants to act without foresight for the successive stages, without any idea for how their actions and likeness will be used, propagated, augmented, etc. The resulting documentation is thus a flattened version of a performed event.

***Nutsy's* and Complacency**

In his exhibition *Nutsy's*, Tom Sachs⁷ constructs an interactive system out of readily accessible materials in a game-based format. This culmination of work links the idealism of modernism to its decay, and poses his bricolage sculpture as response to the pitfalls of the modernist dream. The exhibition revolves around a race car track that whizzes through a series of components representative of the different interpretations of the modernist vision over time, such as a scale model of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation de Marseille* or a foam core recreation of a Mies Van der Rohe sofa, or conversely a worker-operated McDonald's. Many of the components are interactive and the exhibition faces racer participants with many decisions should they interact beyond only viewership of the exhibition. Racers must deliberate whether or not to follow through with the arduous racecar registration process, purchase a grimy 'All American Meal' at the McDonald's or perhaps even use the piss station equipped with a mandatory user piss log. The exhibition also charges participants in ways that feel arbitrary, meaning that the work requires participants to literally buy in in order to engage, but this also fosters a suggested ulterior motive to the work, that the exhibition does not necessarily have their best interests at heart. There seems to be something sinister in the air, that the work uses its audience members for no good. Both Sachs and I only propose two options for interaction: complacent viewership or activity which is consequently complacent with the ideological framework by which the works operate.

⁷ Some very recent news finds him to be a total creepo jerk. I do not endorse him as a person, though I'd be lying if I were to say that I was not artistically inspired by *Nutsy's*.



Fig. 4. Tom Sachs. *Nutsy's* at Guggenheim Museum, 2003.

Samson and Impossible Impossibilities

No Outside Coins Allowed prominently features my friend Tim, who is essentially a lookalike stand-in for me, operating what is in essence a money making device situated within the familiar white wall gallery of the art world. The artwork exists as the product of this space, which implies that the systems which have exalted the work predicate upon exploitation in order to function. There is no effort to make appearances for this space, the work is a proud trick that showcases systems which allow for it to extort its participants. The raw materials of commodity that make up the piece reflect a utilitarian ethos, as the artwork functions as a mere tool in order to accumulate money.

No Outside Coins Allowed points at the confluence of aesthetic and economic values, then its value comes from the social capital it creates, despite whatever economic value it may obtain. With its pejorative craft and obviously deceitful premise, the artwork does all of this to performatively illustrate the actual value of the work— it generates a greater social awareness. My efforts mirror that of Chris Burden's in his 1985 performance-based sculpture *Samson*. The work consists of a turnstile that would slowly turn a winch that pushed against the walls of the gallery in which it had been installed. As participants interact with the work, they and the work appear to slowly but surely destroy the institution surrounding them. Chris Burden never intended for the machine to actually bring down the walls of the gallery, the actual destruction never even took place, meaning that the gallery institution was the eventual victor. No matter how valiant the artists' performative efforts, however straightforward or direct they were in bringing down the gallery, though they *could* have brought the building down, they only ended up endorsing the intended message as was ordained by the gallery. My

work elicits similar questions of audience engagement and thus agency, but where Samson feels as honest or direct as possible, though also humorous, *No Outside Coins Allowed* is ostensibly cynical.



Fig. 5. Chris Burden. *Samson*, 1985.

Metamodernism: Takeaways from Stilted Parameters

My work responds to the current stance of metamodern works. Metamodern works react to the instability of the postmodern movement and impart a self-aware vulnerability in the attempt to forge “coherence is a state that is worked towards even while it is ultimately unachievable” (Hannay). This movement of works is primarily concerned with the performative act of attempting to attain the unachievable rather than the measured success of this action. As Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker describe in their seminal work *Notes on Metamodernism*, “Meta-modern artworks consciously commit... [themselves] to an impossible possibility”, in my case that being the ability to have autonomy under capitalism (Vermeulen and van der Akker 5). Where my work differs from the likes of pure metamodernism lies in its handling of irony. Where Peter McMaster’s *Gold Piece* asks participants to reconstruct broken pieces of ceramics or patch cracks in bricks with gold, mine asks participants to be complicit with the very systems in which they are paradoxically opposing. In a metamodern sense, the merit from the piece does not come from participation or the lack thereof, as both mark complacency, but it comes from the audience’s newfound awareness of the audience-immediacy relationship set forth by the work.

My work incorporates a pejorative embrace of capital to interrogate the amount of agency one may have under capitalism. As my work is backhandedly complicit within this system, it proposes social capital or greater understanding as a subsequent response that operates independent of the capitalist ethic, meaning that it is in turn self-sufficient.



Fig. 6. Peter McMaster. *Gold Piece*, 2016.

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