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To Dig a Hole and Fill It Back Up:
Reflections on Labor, Meditation, and Product

by

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Abstract:

The socioeconomical philosophy of the United States is still very much related to the Marxist Labor Theory of Value which states that “the economic value of a good or service is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor required to produce it” (*Das Kapital*, Marx 1.) This philosophy has penetrated the way that we think about art and object, and in turn positions art as a means of transaction, thus limiting art to a form of glorified currency. This Essay will chronicle my art practice, that have led up to two thesis pieces, *Trench* and *Dig and Fill*. It will then explain how *Trench* and *Dig and Fill* reinterpret the Marxist labor theory of value through the lens of contemporary performance art, Land art, Greek mythology, and craft.

It's well before dawn when my shovel first pierces the skin of the earth. The air is cold, and it is punctuated by a strong wet wind that percolates through barren tree branches. Above me, a skein of ducks flies silently towards Southern Canada. They are nothing more than silhouettes, but against the mute gray sky their movements are sharp to the few animals and trees that are awake at this hour. The earth is still colorless, and the topsoil is hardened by a layer of frost--winter has not yet yielded to spring. However, the ducks' presence reveals one thing: the equinox is near.

Equipped with a shovel and a white five-gallon bucket, I begin removing the dirt beneath my feet and placing it in a pile to my left. In other words, I simultaneously create a cavity--a negative mark--and a mound--a positive mark. The two marks are inversely related to each other; the deeper I dig, the taller I build. I work as the sun rises. The ducks that once flew overhead are now miles away, and the few quiet animals that were awake have been replaced by a cacophony of diurnal critters croaking, tweeting, and scurrying. In the hole, I find nothing but dirt and the occasional stone. Each shovel of dirt is heavier than the last, and my shoulders singe as I try to lift my shovel out of my hole, which is now nearly 7 feet deep. Still, possessed by unanswered questions, I continue to dig. How much longer will I be able to do this? How old is the earth that I am digging now? How many equinoxes has it seen? What is underneath it all?

Finally, after nearly 4 and half hours and 7 feet of cavity making and mound building, I find answers. The earth has been changing in the last 30 minutes, it's been wet and mud-like, and with another strike of the shovel, I understand why. A small stream of water trickles--I had hit the water table. My mound has changed too. For the entire duration of the performance, it had framed itself against the brown and blonde background of the dirt and wheat grass. However,

just as the hole reached the water table, the top of the mound exceeded the horizon line touching the vast blue sky. It was time to start filling.

Much of my art practice is driven by the question of what makes us human. And how and whether we are any different from animals. I often find my answers by sifting through clay's conceptual dichotomies. Just like people, clay is both organic and manmade. Consequently, it is used by people for both utility and art. I reflect on this by digging on site, slowly working my way through the layers of clay on the Mississippi River, but also by tearing, digging and otherwise drawing into clay slabs in the studio. Working with clay and earth is immediate, responsive and connects me to elemental human art making.

As humans, we are accelerating towards innovation, automation, and industry with the aim to provide humanity greater security and comfort. In other words, we are desperately attempting to tame ourselves. However, despite our best efforts, we hesitate before eliminating our animalistic qualities and instead create spaces within our growing order that allow and even celebrate our raw wildness. One of these places our animalistic behavior is celebrated is the sport of American Football. In my piece *American Football (2022)* fig.1. I create an abstraction of the game to highlight the wildness within it. I use the dynamic and chaotic marks of my fingers in the clay to depict the grinding, crashing, and gnarring of the players as well as the deafening roar from the crowd. Clay is integral to this representation, as the medium both reflects the tension between manmade and nature, as well as grounds our “contemporary” lifestyle into the vast history of humanity.



Fig.1 Whetstone, Jack Henry. *American football*. 2022, Unfired Stoneware

A video representation of this illustrative process, *Clay Horse* (2022) fig.2, shows me, the artist, scratching, tearing and ripping the shape of a horse in motion out of a 700-pound brick of clay. In the video, I am fascinated with the horse's speed and power and my depiction of the horse is an attempt to capture its energy as it moves through the plains. The effort is of course, naturally futile, with the end result looking closer to a fossil than the powerful beast in stride. I am speaking about what it means to tame a mustang-- to turn raw power into horsepower and beast into tool.



Figure 2. Whetstone, Jack Henry. *Clay Horse*. 2022, Unfired

In my thesis, I continue to explore the conceptual dichotomies of humans and nature and utility in art; however, I move outside the material bounds of clay. I culminate my ideas in two pieces: *Dig and Fill* (2023) fig.3, a performative video piece during which I dig a hole and fill it

back up for a total of eight hours, and *Trench (2023)* fig.4, a multimedia sculpture that uses multiple forms of craft including ceramics, inkjet photo printing, and woodworking.

The same hole and mound can be many things. A burial, a hiding place, an endeavor, a foundation, a home, destruction, or a playful activity. *Dig and Fill* is an ephemeral hole-and-mound, which work to create dialogue between Endurance art, Land Art, and Marxist Labor Theory of Value. It investigates alternative relationships between labor, product, intention, and value.



Figure 3. Whetstone, Jack Henry. *Dig and Fill*. 2023, video



Whetstone, Jack Henry, *Trench* (2023). Walnut, Pine, Inkjet Print on Japanese Murakumo paper.

Karl Marx and Fredrich Engles to

quantify the value of any and every man-made product and expose the exploitative nature of capitalism. It argues that “The Economic Value of a good or service is determined by the amount of socially necessary labor required to produce it” (*Das Kapital*, Marx 1). Marx and Engles assume that an individual inherently owns their time and energy, and that their time and energy is both valuable and malleable. Thus, if they are willing to exchange their time and energy for

the creation of an object, that object must be equally or more valuable than the time and energy spent making it. This relationship should be intuitive to others through the object's quality, making it then possible to quantify a “natural price” of said object.

In the context of Art making, the evidence of an artist’s expended time and energy is otherwise known as “craft.” When an object is masterfully crafted, it has the ability to generate absolute awe in the viewer. Take Claude Mellan's copper engraving, *Face of Christ* (1649) fig.5. The engraving features a single line starting at the tip of the nose and spiraling out with varying thickness to create a near

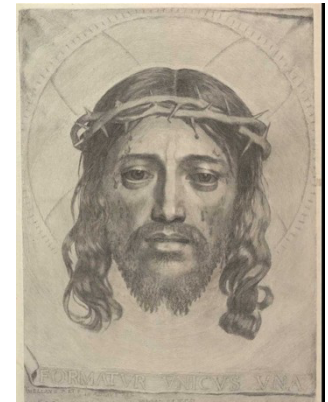


Fig.5 Mellan, Claude, Face of Christ. 1649, intaglio print

photorealistic image of the face of Jesus Christ. Mellan’s ability, Commitment, and time expended to render minute shadows, values, expressions through a single line is nothing less than extraordinary. The viewer is made immediately aware that Mellan has exchanged significant labor to create this piece and is thus made conscious of *Face of Christ*’s apparent value. For most of art history, an artist's labor was their craft, and their ability to craft well was directly correlated with their worth.

Craft will surely remain an indicator of value in art. However, I am fascinated by how this qualitative evaluation changes when artists prioritize concept over craft within their practice.

Francis Alÿs is an internationally recognized conceptual artist who is best known for his ephemeral performative work. One of Alÿs’s seminal pieces, *Paradox of Praxis* (1997) fig.6, is a short video that documents Alÿs pushing a large block of ice through the streets of Mexico City for 9 hours until it finally melts. There is little traditional “craft”



Fig.6 Alÿs, Francis. Paradox of Praxis (sometimes making something leads to nothing), 1997. Ice, video

in the *Paradox of Praxis* (1997) fig.6. Alÿs first pushes the ice in a hunched over posture and once the ice shrinks small enough, he opts to casually kick the ice down the road with his foot while smoking a cigarette. According to the Marxist interpretation of the (LTV), it seems that *Paradox of Praxis* value can be equated to, at most, 9 hours of simple physical labor. However, this evaluation ignores the astute social commentary embedded in Alÿs's actions. Pushing a block of ice is clearly a meaningless and unproductive action. Alÿs is aware of this yet pushes the block of ice anyway. With Alÿs evident intention, his actions ask the viewer why someone would spend energy to create nothing, and further urges them to reflect on their own expenditure of labor, questioning what it is that they truly produce through their own actions. Alÿs isn't "simply" pushing a block of ice until it melts, but rather performing a visual metaphor that helps viewers holistically examine their own labor practices. In other words, there is far more value in Alÿs's *Paradox of Praxis* than is shown by the piece's craft.

Like Alÿs, I highlight similar concepts surrounding the efficacy of labor and what it means to make nothing in my performance *Dig and Fill* (2023) fig.3. The documentation of *Dig and Fill* consists of two videos that play side by side. In the video on the right, "Dig," I am seen digging the hole and building the mound. In the video on the left, "Fill," I refill the hole and erase the mound. In each video, I perform the same manual laborious task of digging for a sustained 4-hour effort, and together, the videos total a complete eight-hour workday. As the videos play side by side, they constantly point towards the inevitable conclusion of my performance. I am digging into a flat landscape to build a hole-and-mound for the sole purpose of returning said hole-and-mound back to its initial state. In other words, I spend an intense eight-hour workday to make no physical product or progress. With this, I question if the flat land

which I had labored in is now somehow more valuable than before, despite no apparent change in its form. According to the (LTV), I believe that Marxists must say yes.

Furthermore, I am interested in understanding how this inquiry applies the form of digging itself. Most holes, if not dug for play, are dug for progress. A hole may be the beginning of a foundation of a house, or a home; a wild hunt for treasure, or a hiding spot for treasure; a burial, or in the case of Toru Okada in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicles* by Haruki Murakami, a fitting place for spiritual rebirth. All these holes may formally appear the same -- a cavity in the earth and a mound of dirt next to it --but they are meant for different things, and thus mean different things. This is not to say all holes are equal. Some hole-and-mounds may be more important than others because some reasons are more important than others. In *Dig and Fill*, my reason for making the hole-and-mound mark is so that I can erase it. I am pursuing equilibrium.

When I am digging and my hands first begin to blister against the wooden handle of the shovel, I begin to think of Sisyphus (Illiad VI, Homer). Poor Sisyphus. I can only imagine how many calluses he had torn, after all these millennia of endlessly pushing the boulder up the mountain. I wonder if he still tears them. Maybe his hands have been worn so raw that they are nothing but blood, flesh, and little chips of bone, and each roll of the boulder is more agonizing than the last. Or maybe, his hands have healed back stronger each time he pleasantly descends the mountain after yet another successful push of the boulder, and at this point, his hands have become so strong and so accustomed to the gods' punishment that he rarely thinks about them anymore. I suppose it depends on Sisyphus and his intention. In the former, Sisyphus pushes the boulder to fulfill his punishment. In the latter, Sisyphus' pushes to rise above the gods curse,

and he instead opts to push the boulder for the sake of boulder pushing. If it were me, I'd take the latter.

Western contemporary Land Art emerged in the early 1970s and was most popular in the United States and Great Britain. It is characterized by direct intervention into the earth and landscape and often features dirt, gravel, biomass, and other various elements of the surrounding natural environment. Land art was a deliberate attempt to dislodge conceptual art from the institutional environment of the white-walled gallery and reconnect and reframe elemental creative practices. However, despite the apparent reconnection to the earth and environment, some of the most popular land art engaged with the environment by domination rather than harmonious communication, seeing vast land simply as an opportunity to expand the boundaries of scale set by the white-walled gallery.

Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) fig. 7 is a prime example of this. In *Double Negative*, Heizer uses excavators to carve two trenches measuring 30 feet, 50 feet deep and 1500 feet long into the Moapa desert. Heizer dumped more than 244,000 tons of the excavated earth into the canyon below. *Double Negative* forces the viewer to expand their context of scale as Heizer usurps the landscape and turns Moapa Mesa Valley into his canvas. In response to critics' concerns of his destructive scale, Heizer responds with the question:

"As long as you're going to make a sculpture, why not make one that competes with a 747, or the Empire State Building, or the Golden Gate Bridge?"

Heizer seemingly evaluates art according to the Marxist reading of the (LTV). The amount of social labor and power to carve such a trench into a landscape can hardly be

comprehended by a single individual, so surely its value must also be tremendous. I'm not so certain. Heizer embodies a capitalist approach to land. The land is his, and he is going to use state of the art technology to make something bigger, better, and more powerful. For me, *Double Negative* (1969) fig. 7 is certainly big, but also equally bad and ugly.



Fig.7 Heizer, Michael. *Double Negative*. 1969, Earthworks

While Heizer champions an aggressive approach towards land art, this philosophy is countered by that of Richard Long, particularly in his pieces on walking. In his piece *A line made by walking* (1967) fig.8, Long walks until his feet wear down the ground beneath him and his path is temporarily drawn into the land. He then documents his experience by taking a landscape photograph that features the path alone, effectively chronicling every time Long has walked it. In this work, Long aligns himself with a tradition that has been practiced for eons. Lines in landscapes are usually formed by terrestrial animals moving from one place to another. The depth, width, placement, and meandering all serve to represent how often the abiotic is frequented by biotic. In other words, these lines are like signatures of a species, society, or ecosystem telling where they are from and where they go. Ultimately, these lines, including Richard Long's piece, will disappear if they are not maintained by a constant beat of footsteps. Thus, Long is not scarring the land to make art, but rather communicating with it. He is saying "I like to walk here" and the land accepts him and adapts to his presence.



Fig.8 Long, Richard. *A line Made by Walking*. 1970, Gelatin Silver Print

In the context of Western Contemporary Land Art, I intend for *Dig and Fill* to align more with Long than with Heizer. I would like to commune with the land rather than own it.

Therefore, the mark I make into the earth is a personal one. By using only my own body and a singular handheld tool, I feel the weight of every ounce of dirt that I remove from the hole, and after roughly 10,000 pounds of dirt, my body and muscles inevitably begin to tear. In this way, I may only dig into the earth as much as I am willing to let the earth dig back into my body.

Additionally, in my effort to refill the mark, and return the earth back to its original state, I close any incision I made during the digging process.

Dig and Fill exists in two forms, the video documentation, and the performance. The video documentation presents to the viewer a hard manual laborer working to neutralize his own mark. It questions the value of labor as it relates to product and the value of craft as it relates to art. The performance of *Dig and Fill* has an audience of one, me. I perform *Dig and Fill* to connect with the landscape. I feel its weight, find its equilibrium at the top of the water table, and watch, briefly, as earth turns to water and dirt turns to air before filling the hole back to its original state. It is a sinusoidal and ritualistic act. Just as the ducks fly overhead, or as the sunrise turns sunset, or as winter turns to spring, digging turns to filling and back again.

The second piece in my thesis, *Trench*, was made in dialogue with *Dig and Fill*. If *Dig and Fill* is about undermining the transactional relationship of labor and craft to object, *Trench*, explores the power of persuasion in craft and beauty. The subject matter of *Trench* is exactly what it sounds-- a hand dug trench that measures seven feet long, three feet wide and three feet deep at its deepest point. However, despite being derived from labor, digging, and dirt, there is no actual dirt in the representation of the piece. Instead, a picture of hand dug dirt is digitally printed on a ten-foot-long roll of Murakumo Japanese paper that is so thin that it is semi-translucent. The paper is then hung on a seven-foot-wide U-shaped wooden frame that is made from black walnut with pine inlays. The print rests in a curve that mimics the cavity of a trench within the handcrafted frame and is delicate enough to sway as the viewer walks by and creates subtle changes in the surrounding air pressure. In effect, the dirt and labor that it took to dig the trench appears weightless and is concealed behind the inherent objectness, craft, and beauty of the piece.

Traditionally, trenches are holes and mounds that are related to filth, war, and suffering. *Trench* uses craft to override these connotations, instead highlighting the beauty within the subtle changes in value within the earth as well as the virtue in the labor it took to create it. *Trench* was inspired by Xu Bing's installation *Book From the Sky* (1988) fig.10. Here, massive yet delicate paper scrolls hang on the walls and from the ceiling are accompanied by a room full of ancient looking books. Neat and careful writing covers all the paper within the room. It would take even the most literate of viewers days to read it all, so many don't even try. This is exactly what Bing wants. In truth, while the writing on the scrolls resembles Chinese, it is a completely nonsensical language that Bing has made himself. However, many viewers leave Bing's installation in reverence all the same, because they assume that if someone was willing to handwrite many

books worth of information, and then present them with such care and beauty, that the information probably is incredibly significant. After all, why else would someone spend so much labor producing something that meant nothing?



Fig. 10 Bing, Xu. *Book from the sky*, 1988, installation of hand-printed books and ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type; ink on paper

Within the historical context, Xu Bing's portfolio, *Book From the Sky*, speaks to the persuasive power of rhetoric during the reign of Mao Ze Dong, and how the Chinese people were inculcated with powerful communist propaganda. In *Trench*, I am using the persuasion of craft to convince viewers of the beauty of the soil and my hand dug mark that has been so present within my practice. I do indeed think that the beauty of the soil needs to be highlighted—especially to the contemporary art audience, as they are becoming increasingly disconnected from elemental artforms. However, underneath the beautification of the earth, *Trench*, confronts the unfounded ethos that is generated from fine craftsmanship. This is why labor, and craft not only does not automatically equate to value, but it also should not. In art, I believe that the artistic labor of craft is simply how something is said, and that the viewer should be cognizant of the fact that nothing said beautifully is still, at its core, nothing.

In my thesis work, *Dig and Fill* and *Trench* juxtaposes the laborious creation of nothing against the labor of a highly crafted object to pushback against the Marxist (LTV). I mean to say that value should not be derived from the amount of time and labor it takes to make a certain thing, but instead should be predicated on the object itself and the reason why the object or action is made. Additionally, in these pieces I aim to expose the drawbacks of a transactional relationship with both land and art and opt instead for a personal experiential relationship with the land and landscape.

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List of figures

Figure 1 . Whetstone, Jack Henry. *American football*. 2022, Unfired Stoneware

Figure 2. Whetstone, Jack Henry. *Clay Horse*. 2022, Unfired Stoneware

Figure 3. Whetstone, Jack Henry. *Dig and Fill*. 2023, video

Figure 4. Mellan, Claude, Face of Christ. 1649, intaglio print

Figure 5. Alÿs, Francis. *Paradox of Praxis*. 1997, Video

Figure 6. Heizer, Michael. *Double Negative*. 1969, Earthworks

Figure 7. Long, Richard. *A line Made by Walking*. 1970, Gelatin Silver Print

Figure 8. Whetstone, Jack Henry. *Trench*. 2023, walnut, pine, Inkjet print on Murakomo Kozo paper

Figure 9. Bing, Xu. Book from the sky, 1988, installation of hand-printed books and ceiling and wall scrolls printed from wood letterpress type; ink on paper