

Tension in Play

Morgan MacDonell

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Committee:

Stephanie Hanes

Michael Swaine

Juliet Sperling

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Abstract

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Morgan MacDonell

Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Stephanie Hanes

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Tension in Play is a thesis paper detailing context and methodology surrounding my artwork from the past 2 years while pursuing a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Washington. I recall specific memories from working within the service industry that act as the context to multiple artworks in this paper. I reference multiple artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Doris Salcedo. Additionally, I discuss the importance of both confronting and embracing the viewer of my artwork in order to possibly sustain a conversation that can move a person towards social change that may have a different perspective than myself.

Tension in Play

Standing in flour and sugar encrusted black non-slip shoes and wearing a polyester apron on a 100-degree sunny Southern California day was an ordinary shift I would work while employed at a donut shop. This is a subjective experience, something that throughout academia, other jobs, and making art has been present. The time that I spent working at that donut shop is a memory I often pull from when considering context within my art. It acts as a reference when I consider and reflect upon the complications of making art around labor and the relationship between server and consumer within an American context. During my time working in the service industry, I experienced and still experience moments of pride, contempt, anger, sadness, and emptiness. This often looks like any other public exchange between a cashier and a customer. These experiences have made me question the mixed lines between being a server with a name tag pinned to your chest and being the customer with no visible demarcation. From my perspective when working in the service industry, the job requires constant emotional investment and much of the social interaction I would have in any given week was with the public around me. The situation I describe in my artwork is meant to allow the viewer to be able to stand away from that common exchange and to see a part of everyday life that goes largely unnoticed and unfelt. I hope to use sculpture to question cycles of trauma associated with working in the service industry because I believe it is a medium that allows the conditions that structure and control how we move through physical space to be questioned.

A possible way for art to be made meaningful and to question cycles of trauma is by making artwork that is able to simultaneously confront and embrace the viewer. I believe this is important to consider when making art intended to change a person's understanding of a part of

society and just as importantly allow space for people who may need it to be able to process trauma, specifically if they've experienced trauma through the service industry. Creating artwork that solely does one of these actions does not sustain and progress a conversation amongst people with differing perspectives in a way that I feel is complex enough.

Often, in my work I am asking an audience to navigate a situation that places them into a reflection of everyday life. My recent work puts the viewer into situations made specific to places such as a grocery store and the domestic space to question how to more holistically understand a service worker's experience of everyday life. The work is intended to be sensitive to the different emotional states and labor that result from being in a constant state of moving from service worker to customer to family member to individual in any given moment. How does this form of compartmentalizing oneself into these different roles and the commonality of it define the lines between people today?

Many of the artworks I will be discussing in this paper function similarly to memorials in order to acknowledge and to remember the people whose labor has recently been classified as essential yet do not feel valued or seen within American society. A subjective experience can be a useful departure point. I pull from specific personal memories related to the context of a piece when coming up with the visual language. These memories are often tied to a workplace such as a grocery store, donut shop, coffee shop, or restaurant. I take my experiences from working within the food service industry and try to talk about how those experiences were shaped by labor conditions within the US. Also, how our personal perception of labor conditions in the US can contrast with the stark reality of many people's positions within the labor market. This is important as I perceive many people to understand a person's value in the US as a direct correspondence to their job, position, title, or economic productivity. How does this

understanding of value create unusual distance between people and who is left to mediate our everyday lives and under what conditions?

The reality of the economy in the US, is one of rising inequality among wage earners. In 1979 hourly pay began to diverge from economywide productivity, “Since 1979, “real” (inflation-adjusted) hourly pay for the vast majority of American workers has diverged from economywide productivity, and this divergence is at the root of numerous American economic challenges.” (Gould). Meaning that as most workers have continued to increase their productivity, their wages have not grown at a proportional rate. At the same time the productivity increases have been seen in the last 40 years there have certainly been a specific group of people who have benefited, “..the top 1% of earners saw cumulative gains in annual wages of 157.8% between 1979 and 2018—far in excess of economywide productivity growth and over six times as fast as average growth for the bottom 90% (23.9%). Over the same period, top 0.1% earnings grew 340.7%.” (Gould). This trend has occurred over decades. The generational consequences of this economic pattern and the conditions that have resulted and affect contemporary life for so many people are hard to accurately imagine today.

From my perspective working within different scales of the service industry whether in, a large grocery store chain, family-owned restaurants, and shops, and as a university staff member, my coworkers seem to be keenly aware of this wage stagnation but feel as though they have very little agency to change the trending loss of wage growth within their own place of employment. In my work titled *5 Star Rating, 5 Star Life*, I attempt to start a conversation about how the growing gig economy further reduces commerce to a sterile and often conflict filled interaction without much responsibility being placed on the corporation that greatly benefits from the labor of their workers. As seen in Figure 1., the piece presents the viewer with a situation in the act of

balancing where a body isn't present, but the structure of the exchange is visible in the literal use of a grocery bag, a door suspended by the bag, and a pulley attached to the gallery ceiling holding everything up. On the surface of the door are receipts nailed into the front of it, receipts I had collected over the year I had already been in Seattle. Leaving out the presence of a discernable body calls into question the conditions of the exchange, asking who is involved and how does the interaction look from the perspective of the delivery driver and the customer buying the food? The literal suspension of the door with the counterbalance of the bag of goods is a visual way to talk about the interconnected but often disparate relationship between the two people momentarily participating in commerce through the gig economy.

The title *5 Star Rating, 5 Star Life*, acknowledges that the livelihood of gig workers relies on a decimal point margin of averaged reviews from customers. The corporations who structure these apps and interactions face very little consequence if there is a conflict between the customer and the delivery person. This piece is meant to question the decisions behind the structure that conditions these common interactions between people.

In Seattle during the summer of 2020 until the summer of 2021 I worked at a grocery store and witnessed firsthand how visible the distance between server and customer affected the people who worked in the store. Many of my past coworkers enjoy working with the public. I remember specific conversations with coworkers following incidents where they were left to mediate a conflict with a customer. One example of many incidences, was on a weekly basis a person who self-identified as an 'anti-masker' would come in wearing a GoPro camera on his head, defying the store policy and city law of wearing a mask while in the store. He would intentionally come into conflict with store employees and record them with a camera on his forehead. This person would often bring their young child with them and throw cash at the

checkout stand on their way out of the store as a form of payment. I witnessed my coworkers making slightly above minimum wage be regularly put into states of high stress resulting in visible anger, the break room becoming a safe space to cry, and overall physical and mental exhaustion. When efforts by the city to momentarily require grocery workers to be paid hazard pay the then CEO wrote a personal letter to the mayor asking them not to pass the ordinance (Roberts). While our CEO was writing a personal plea to the mayor to not pay us more, I was struck by the feeling of invisibility and alienation that myself and my coworkers felt daily. In conversation with a cashier while bagging for them, between customers, they said to me, “I really enjoy seeing and meeting so many people every day, but I just want to be cared about.”. This simple statement was from a person who pridefully worked at that store for more than a decade.

How is it that a person who serves hundreds of people every day does not feel seen or cared about within their place of work, where one often spends much of their waking time? What does this say about our society when a person is simultaneously being told by their employer, they are not worth additional compensation during a pandemic and met with multiple types of conflict ranging from the threat of violence, blatant classism, and political disdain from the public? How does a person who gains so much of their sense of meaning and purpose from work continue to care, themselves?

With many of my artworks I am trying to subvert the viewers understanding of not just an individual represented by their work in a sculpturally presented situation, but some of the complexities of everyday life many service workers experience. By mimicking, abstracting, or pulling directly from the material language of a place, these are all methods of making art that can call to a specific reality. The building materials that go into the architectural forms in my

work are often sourced locally and second hand. My piece titled *Checkout*, uses many of the building materials that would make up a check stand in a real store. By using materials in this way I am trying to evoke a phenomenological response from the viewer. The physical appearance of *Checkout* helps to contextualize the artwork in a way that evokes a familiar space for the viewer to consciously enter. Many Arte Povera sculptures used phenomenology like, Michelangelo Pistoletto's mirror paintings seen in Figure 3. In his mirror paintings your own reflection and conscious understanding of space would become implicated with the context of the paintings. The mirrored surface reflects your image onto and into its surface. Mierle Laderman Ukeles would do something similar by using a trash truck at the end of a parade moving through the streets with its sides as mirrored planes reflecting the crowd and the trash resulting from the parade (Figure 4.). In *Checkout*, I don't literally reflect the viewers appearance onto its surface but provide an architectural form that is similar to the size and scale of an actual checkout stand. This is meant to evoke the specific moment a customer would stand across from a cashier and when the space between those people is momentarily engaged. Within that moment so much is communicated and almost instantly understood by a cashier who has spent much of their work week navigating those transactions. This interaction for me is a place where the definition of a community, a sense of locality, and essential work all collapse together. It's a moment that is indicative of how the people that maintain essential services are thought of by society. *Checkout*, is a piece ultimately meant to engage the viewer in a way to start a conscious conversation about how we structure the conditions that define so much of everyday life for the people that maintain it for everyone else.

Time is an important aspect of a person's experience of life. An aspect of being a service worker that often is invisible and not talked about is the tole that occurs to a service worker's domestic life. In my piece titled, *drawing on the wall*, I bring the viewer not to a place strictly

reflective of a workspace but of a domestic space influenced by labor (Figure 5./6.). Confronting the viewer is a game of tic-tac-toe plastered into the surface of a standing wall and painted over. On the other side of the wall is an apron plastered and hanging from the upper half of the wall. The viewer is welcome to walk through the hallway frame to move between sides. This piece was meant to talk about the emotional labor that service worker carries outside of the physical space they work in and how cycles of trauma can be passed down. Combining the childlike drawing of a kid's game on the wall and the height of an apron on the other side, a plurality of perspectives can be had. This piece could be read from the perspective of a child who witnesses the before and after of their parent working, also from the perspective of a parent who may not be able to afford the rising cost of housing, or from the perspective of a worker who feels as though they are faced with a rigged game. In my opinion all of these experiences are widespread and not given space to be considered. From the worker's perspective who spends most of their time preparing for work, working, and recovering from work, being able to find time and the correct space to reflect on these daily experiences is difficult. The part of these architectural forms that brings them closer to memorial than minimalism is that quality of consciously thinking about life triggered by a physical object or space. I am constantly startled by how easy it is to be employed full time and to simultaneously disassociate in a way where feeling for yourself or others becomes difficult.

I think when a society is built on people who are often prideful of their labor, who find their meaning and survival through their employment and are met with an economy that doesn't care for them and a society that says that that is ok, it results in a profound sense of loss made even worse by a lack of an outlet to acknowledge this loss. Doris Salcedo attempts to add humanity to the silence of continual loss from war that she believes is a part of our everyday life:

“A work of art as funeral oration explores possible ways in which to formulate a poetics of mourning. Our very humanity resides within the devotion or contempt that we assign to our practices, processes, and rituals of mourning. An aesthetic view of death reveals an ethical view of life, and it is for this reason there is nothing more human than mourning” (Salcedo, Doris Salcedo, 215).

Ultimately, I believe Salcedo’s work is able to emotionally move an audience who may be disconnected from loss experienced by somebody else. This focus on humanity in art is something I find to be rare and radical. It moves the power of the context of Salcedo’s work away from the structure that carries out violence and places it in the hands of the people who have passed away or are experiencing loss. Salcedo also is pointing out how pervasive loss is and how it is a dynamic force that affects many more people than just the individual who experienced violence. In my own work I hope to make the viewer aware of how cycles of trauma repeat, are often invisible, and affect many more people than the offender or the victim.

The various situations I put forth in my art is often coming from my subjective experience and is meant to be questioned. It is meant to get the viewer to a place where they can consciously reflect on what an honest exchange of service, care, or art feels like and to then imagine meaningful change. I think this approach to making art is especially important when considering how to make work that is focused on social change. Today, I find it difficult to imagine people with differing opinions to be able to even tolerate occupying the same public space. I do not know exactly who benefits from this divide or why it benefits them, but it is an undeniable loss of humanity that many people have become unable to connect with the people they directly interact with in everyday life. If my work can slow down a viewer long enough to engage them in a conscious conversation with themselves or with the people around them then I believe the work has been successful.

Figures



Figure 1. 5 Star Rating, 5 Star Life, 2021, Door, receipts, cut tacks, grocery bag, paint, pulleys, string



Figure 2. Checkout, 2022, Composite tile, melamine board, Acrylic sheet, 2x6s, plywood, clay, old masks



Figure 3. Installation view of Michelangelo Pistoletto: A Reflected World, with Seated Woman at center. Walker Art Center.



Figure 4. Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Sanitation Celebrations: Grand Finale of the First NYC Art Parade, Part I: The Social Mirror*, 1983; garbage collection truck, tempered glass mirror, and acrylic mirror



Figure 5. *drawing on the wall*, 2022, 2x4s, sheet rock, drywall mud, apron, composite tile, molding, plywood, paint



Figure 6. drawing on the wall, 2022, 2x4s, sheet rock, drywall mud, apron, composite tile, molding, plywood, paint

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