From 'Means to Ends': Labour As Art Practice

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Fine Arts
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FROM ‘MEANS’ TO ‘ENDS’: LABOUR AS ART PRACTICE

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Gabriella Solti

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

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

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Abstract

My thesis discusses labour from three different historical and theoretical viewpoints, namely Karl Marx’s perspectives on labour, Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Action and Jacques Rancière’s radical view of workers as an aspirational class, including how their respective philosophies influenced discourse on labour in contemporary art. To examine the aesthetic consequences of these labour theories, my discussion of each writer is accompanied by a case study of a contemporary artist whose work operates in dialogue with the philosophical ideas presented. In conclusion, I bring these theories together by focusing on how they implicate art making as labour, and I point to my own art practice, which aims to collapse ‘means’ into ‘ends’ as a possible strategy to address some of the issues raised by the theorists I examine.

Keywords

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Introduction // Background and Cultural Influences

Labour plays a central role in my art practice in two ways. I am attracted to labour-intensive mediums that require significant technical skills such as printmaking or traditional photographic processes. I place a high value on mastering the use of tools, equipment and processes. It is my view that to make experimental works through creative deviations in these mediums, I first need to master the tools and processes. I need to know the “rules” of the medium in order to be able to break them in a meaningful way. The other aspect of my work that speaks of labour is the emphasis I place on the measure of time, physical effort and manual work involved in my art practice.

In a series of drawings titled Catch that I completed in 2011-12, I used a salmon fishing net that I hand-inked hundreds of times, and then threw on a large sheet of paper and then pressed by hand, using a bonefolder to build layer upon layer of the imprint of the net. For each drawing I continuously worked for a period of 9-11 hours.

In a more recent work I use sandpaper as a drawing tool applied to sandpaper as a surface for markmaking (marks are created by sanding one of the sandpapers with the other by hand) to draw attention to both the material qualities of the medium as well as my labour. The sandpaper / microabrasives I use are made of extremely hard and small particles that make them very difficult to erase. Regarding the emphasis on labour in the work, my criterion to determine the end of a particular period in the process is the point at which I experience the utmost fatigue, which often presents itself in actual physical pain in my hand, palm or arm. The works produced with this process are records of my labouring body (often literally made visible through the imprints of my fingers and palm on the eroded surface of the material). The human physicality invested in laborious process appears to be directly transported into the created objects, as the aesthetic qualities of the objects come not from picture making decisions but from decisions I make by recognizing the limitations of my body. The pain I feel makes me change my movements/gestures or the methods of working on the surface (e.g. using sanding cords instead of
sheets of sandpaper) in order to employ other less tired muscles in my attempt to try to erase the surface of the sandpaper. As an artist, I consider struggle, pain and fatigue as intrinsic values of the kind of labour from which creative action is born. As Albert Camus writes in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942: "The struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." My current works and those that I intend to make build upon a strong commitment to the handmade and to labour itself.

There are numerous contemporary artists for whom strenuous manual labour is an important aspect of their work. Liza Lou for example, who has made her early bead-covered installations such as *Kitchen* (1991-1995) all by herself by hand, over many years, speaks emphatically about the intrinsic value of manual labour: that labour for its own sake is intrinsically virtuous: “Even labor, even the most repetitive, difficult type of labor like scrubbing floors, that has value too. So I'm hoping to give dignity to labor and give dignity to everyday life.”¹ Similarly, Dieter Roth asked the weaver of his tapestries, Austrian artist Ingrid Wiener, to incorporate the consequences of fatigue from so much weaving into the work requesting that the weaver deploy a technique he proposed that subtly recorded the tiredness and fading attention of the weaver.²

Labour has become a frequent topic within contemporary art that stems both from a return to craft since the 1990s as well as a response to changes in economic and social relations. Exhibitions such as “A Labor of Love”, curated by Marcia Tucker in 1996 at the New Museum, presented over 100 - often intricate and labour-intensive - works of art and installations from fifty contemporary artists; the exhibition included Liza Lou’s *Kitchen*. These works variously explored the definitions and lines of divide that ostensibly separate craft, folk art and fine arts. The exhibition examined the role of labour in artmaking and handiwork, considering these within the public and private realm, and concentrating on differences in intent and value and the traditional separation of high art

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from the quotidian. Another exhibition entitled “Work Ethic”, presented at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2003 and curated by Helen Molesworth, looked at the “work” in artwork, at different aspects of artistic labour. This exhibition of works by an international group of contemporary artists was organized into four separate sections: The Artist as Manager and Worker: The Artist Creates and Completes a Task; The Artist as Manager: The Artist Sets a Task for Others to Complete; The Artist as Experience Maker: The Audience Completes the Work; and Quitting Time: The Artist Tries Not to Work. It highlighted work from a broad range of artistic movements that originated in the 1960s, including Fluxus, Feminist Art, Conceptual Art, Process Art and Performance – but its aims involved more than giving an introduction to avant-garde practices after World War II and to their key attributes of dematerialization of art and a disregard for traditional artistic skills. According to Molesworth, the impetus for the exhibition came from the recognition of the fundamental transformation of labour after World War II in the United States that shifted from manufacturing to managerial and service labour.

In parallel with such socioeconomic changes in labour conditions, artists too explored, adopted or critically examined those conditions through their art practices. Artistic labour was stripped of its investment in the production of illusion and artifice and became what it really is: work and process, a task to be done – and artists redefined themselves as workers as opposed to creators. Commenting on Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), a plain wooden box and a tape recording of the sawing and hammering that put it together, Molesworth writes: “Here was a work of art content to be described in the language of work as opposed to that of art. Sawing and hammering had replaced drawing and composition [...] and presented itself to the world as it was: a box with the sound of its own making, an object insistent upon the labor of its maker.”


What makes the “Work Ethic” exhibition particularly relevant is that it was mounted at a time when another significant shift occurred in contemporary labour practices. Since the early twenty-first century, globalization has firmly taken hold and commodities and consumer goods have come to be produced by cheap labour in developing countries (often in questionable workplace conditions) while “the labour of developed nations has increasingly become the management of information and the production of experience.”  

Thus there is a renewed interest among artists, curators, writers and academics in subjects such as labour, work and play, and what new forms of distribution regarding globalized labour can mean to artistic practice. For example, Liza Lou has moved her studio from the US to South-Africa near Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, a province which is home of the most accomplished of the Zulu bead-workers. There she employs over thirty skilled men and women of the Zulu tribe. While she often labours along with her employees making her detailed, intricate beadworks, her role in art making has changed; instead of being the sole maker of her work “she acts as a choreographer of the project, directing skilled and experienced craftspeople.”  

Recently artists themselves have also been organizing symposia and events to discuss various aspects of artistic labour both in the studio and outside of it, including against the backdrop of the larger context of society and its economies. Art & Labor, a daylong conference organized by artists Jessica Stockholder and Joe Scanlan in 2004 at Yale University School of Art, dealt both with the status of the art object and with labour as being of central importance to art making. It also addressed the work of other kinds of labourers such as the assistants, curators, installers, writers and designers who contribute to the manufacture of the object of art.  

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8 There are ethical dimensions at play here, see more on that in Chapter I in the Rancière – Liza Lou section

Lincoln School of Art & Design, University of Lincoln, UK, held in 2004, centered on contemporary ideas on artistic labour as considered by artists and cultural theorists. Participants examined the role of the art object, the material and imaginative condition of artistic labour (and labour in general), how labour can be made visible and to whom, and in a particularly useful way addressed the definition of labour, work and play and their relationship to each other from philosophical and sociological perspectives.  

**My Family and Cultural Influences**

I believe that, as an artist, my gravitating to labour intensive processes and the desire to make this labour visible stems from my cultural and family background. My mother grew up in a small Hungarian village where they made everything themselves from the locally available materials they cultivated (either from plants or animals). She mastered spinning, weaving, sewing, cross stitching and embroidery through daily practice. In fact, those girls in the village whose work did not demonstrate a mastery of these skills were teased by their peers and ridiculed by the larger community and this could hinder their chances for “successfully” marrying.

Notably, the potential to achieve a level of mastery was available to everyone in the society, as learning the requisite skills did not happen at home by relying solely on the skills of the girl’s mother. Training was carried out in group settings in the spinning-houses in a well organized, established way, mimicking a graduated ‘curriculum’, under the tutelage and supervision of older women who were recognized as master weavers by their peers. They were separate spinning-houses for different age groups: 9 - 12 year old girls focused on learning basic skills, teenage girls worked on their trousseau as they could not marry without having made the full content for their hope chest, and adult women carried out most of the work of spinning hemp yarn and weaving textile for their families.

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Though the work they produced with elaborate decorative patterns and intricate embroidery had their place in their daily life, and belongs to the category of folk art and craft, thus making it distinct from high art, it was always highly regarded in Hungary – as opposed to how folk art and craft were treated and viewed in other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{11} This is due to the fact that Hungary was an agricultural country - as distinct from an industrialized one (until World War II), where the majority of population lived from the land that supported individual families maintaining a traditional way of life. Thus, it could be said that William Morris’s Arts and Crafts Movement, as a response to the negative social and aesthetic consequences of the Industrial Revolution to revive and restore dignity to traditional handicrafts, had not much relevance in Hungary, as nothing was lost that needed to be restored. Furthermore – and importantly – Hungarian folk art and a strong craft tradition in the countryside were symbols of Hungarian nationalism and unity.\textsuperscript{12} The way of life my mother experienced growing up, learning traditional skills and making things and objects by hand with the great craftsmanship necessary for the household or for pleasure, such as making children toys, was dismantled after World War II by the communist regime by forced collectivization (during which my grandparents lost their land without compensation), and not because of the Industrial Revolution.

My own family lived in Budapest, and when it came to textile, my mother made everything we needed in our home, from floor and wall carpets, to curtains, pillows and beddings, to handkerchiefs, runners and tablecloths, all meticulously decorated with folk motifs or her own designs. She knitted and sewed our clothes as well. I learned to appreciate and value handmade objects by seeing the investment of time, care and attention in their making. My own experience serves as empirical evidence of Daniel

\textsuperscript{11} By the late nineteenth century for example the preindustrial craft trades which were rooted in Colonial American and Native American craft had almost disappeared in the US due to industrialization and westward expansion. The American Crafts Movement in the early twentieth century was the response to reverse this trend and revive traditional crafts. See Mary Dutton Boehm, “The Arts and Crafts Movement in America,” \textit{San Diego Historical Society Quarterly} 36, no. 2-3 (1990).

Willis’ suggestion that such activities will make us “likely to develop emotional and imaginative attachments to things, and to care for them to a degree that belies their use or exchange value.”  

On my father’s side of the family, I have seen the same investment of time and care manifested in artistic production. My aunt, Gizella Solti, is a highly regarded tapestry artist who, after receiving her artist degree, (a mandatory continuous six year training in Hungary), spent additional years learning the high art of French gobelin at the Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins in Paris. This shaped my early conception of what an artist is: one possessing a highly distinctive set of labouriously learned skills. Given this, when I was reading through the guestbook of the traveling exhibition “Karpit: Tapestry Works From Hungary” in the Richmond Art Gallery in 2002, before the exhibition traveled to its final destination in the Textile Museum in Washington, I was heartened by the many comments that pointed with admiration to the outstanding craftsmanship and labour manifested in the works. Hungarian tapestry art is an autonomous art practice where the artist is expected to perform all aspects of the work from conceiving the initial idea, to making the design, to selecting and dyeing the yarn and weaving the tapestry. A single large scale tapestry takes many years of painstaking work to complete and demands extraordinary commitment from the artist. It was in my aunt’s studio standing in front of an almost finished tapestry still on her huge weaving loom that I first declared to my family at age six that I wanted to be an artist.

I learned in my childhood the value and dignity of manual labour and of making things ourselves by hand, either for utility or pleasure or for artistic creation and it is important for me to bring this into my own practice. I therefore concur with Jessica Stockholder when she says: “Each one of us grows into the history and culture of making that we are born into; our making is always transforming that culture even as it is determined by it.”

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14 Jessica Stockholder, “Art&Labor.”
Chapter 1 // Action and (inter)Action: Labour, Work and Play. Theoretical Foundations in Philosophy

1. Karl Marx: Living Labour as Action and Forming Activity

1.1. Introduction

From the separation of art and craft in the Renaissance that lead to the emergence of the notion of “author”, the social value of making art has for a long time been in flux. Nonetheless “art as a form of labour really took hold with the development of capitalism as a social structure.” Julia Bryan-Wilson cites a number of significant examples of that effect, such as the Artist Guild in England in the 1800s, the Artists’ Union in the 1930s, or the Art Workers Coalition in the 1960s, where artists organized and expressed their common interests through forming professional organizations and grass roots coalitions that directly stemmed from a conscious acknowledgment that art is a form of labour. Marx’s writings and his Labour Theory of Value, and more importantly, his special treatment of artistic labour have greatly influenced artists to the present day. Carl Andre and Colin Darke for example are serious students of Marx, and their artistic work is intellectually informed by Marx’s concept of labour. Artists’ current preoccupations with the relation between the handmade and readymade, intense discourse on the place of “immaterial” labour in artistic production in the context of the new economy, the service sector


17 Julia Bryan-Wilson cites Lucy Lippard referring to Carl Andre, who took a leading role at the Art Workers’ Coalition in 1969 in New York, as their “resident Marxist” and that “Andre was one of the few people at AWC ‘who’d actually read Marx’.” See Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Carl Andre’s Work Ethic,” in Art Workers (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 52.

18 Colin Darke’s extensive (over 300 pages), monographic PhD thesis completed in 2010 at the University of Ulster, Belfast titled “Peception, Realism, Verfremdung: To and From a Bourgeois Aesthetic” focuses an art production from a socio-economic, ideologic and historical perspective building on “Marx’s analysis of the relationships between the economic base of society and the ideological superstructure which derives from it.” (quote from the Thesis’s Abstract)
industry, and digital production, and the broad acceptance of new forms of artistic activity\(^\text{19}\), make direct reference to Marxist thoughts.

It is not possible and it is not my aim to attempt to rehearse a critical analysis of Marx’s concept of labour in a couple of pages, rather, I want to attempt to give a short summary of his key concepts of labour, and offer definitions of the various forms of labour the theorist identified. Marx himself changed or shaped his definitions over time as he developed his ideas further, and also introduced new terminology for things he had already defined, when he felt new terms were more suitable. Thus I find it important for artists to treat Marx’s legacy as an opportunity for intellectual engagement, instead of needing to come to a rigid agreement on how exactly his ideas should be interpreted. Carl Andre and Colin Darke both cite Marx’s concepts on labour extensively and explicitly (particularly those expressed in *Grundrisse*), in their writings, interviews or public talks; their work is clearly in active dialogue with Marx’s ideas. Both artists developed productive art practices while on the other hand their approaches are distinctly different, aligned with their singular sensibilities toward labour, form and material.\(^\text{20}\)

**Marx’s ultimate goal: the abolition of labour**

A key concept of Marx theory from his early writings (and to a lesser degree, in his later works) is the abolition of labour. Marx did not mean that everyone will stop working or that all production ceases, but his thinking aimed to overcome the alienation of labour by employing a radically new mode of production which also calls for a new terminology for human activity. In *The German Ideology*, which Marx co-wrote with Engels in 1845-46, 

\(^{19}\) Like relational aesthetics, performance art, format art, and social practice to name a few.

\(^{20}\) I refer to Colin Darke and Carl Andre as examples for artists finding fertile ground in Marx’s writing for intellectual engagement that influenced their practice but I do not link their practice historically. Darke’s work often centres on the critique of consumption and alienation of labour, frequently turning to copying by hand Marx’s texts (*Grundrisse, Capital*) on commodity objects or on the gallery wall through painstaking multiyear manual labour. Andre on the other hand, as a sculptor, is mostly concerned with the relationship between the material and ‘living labour’ as forming activity while rejecting to transform the materials in a traditional sense to let the material exists in its own right. Andre’s materials are raw materials, commodities for industrial production, while Darke’s commodity objects (the detritus of consumer society such as packaging, notes, cards, adverts) are familiar object from daily life.
we read: “In all the previous revolutions the mode of activity always remained unscathed and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons, whilst the communist revolution is directed against the preceding mode of activity, does away with labour.”

According to Marx, communism would be based on a new mode of productive activity radically different from any form of production in earlier times in history. But what is this labour that Marx wants to abolish, and, by implication, does he imply that all labour should be eliminated? This raises a further question: is all labour alienated and based on exploitation?

Marx differentiates between two kinds of human activity: “purposeful activity” and “free activity” or “self-activity”. Purposeful activity that modern Marxist philosophers, such as Adorno, later call “instrumental activity”, aims to achieve a purpose outside of itself; it is a means to an end, a tool, an instrument. As such it has a dimension of efficiency. An activity should not be done if the purpose can be achieved without performing it. This instrumental material activity reduces the human body (its physicality as well as its mental processes) to a mere tool and thus man is committed to self-estrangement, or self-alienation, such that purposeful or instrumental production becomes alienated production.

This is the subject of Mika Rottenberg’s video installation Dough (2006), which imports practices and representations of labour in the form of an elaborate process. In the video, bodily secretion from uniformed women, air, and pollen are mobilized to make dough rise using a primitive, makeshift machinery to create an utterly inefficient and surreal Taylorian assembly line. At the same time, Rottenberg conflates such instrumental labour with artistic labour to question the value of both. As Marina Vishmidt observes:

We see here the proximity of whimsical creativity and manual labour, ultimately indistinguishable as they are harnessed to an alien logic, be it the labour of the artist or the labour of the unskilled worker. Thus even or because the labour is worth more than the product in Dough, exceeding its nominal purpose it also shows a moment of suspension of the iron law of value at the affective level. There is obviously no social, economic or logical justification to what the women

in the video are doing: their work is utterly absurd, and is perhaps driven by this absurdity, but there is a sense of aesthetic gratification at the ingenuity of it all.²²

Mika Rottenberg, *Dough*, 2006, video installation, 7 min, stills

Marx contrasts purposeful activity with free activity or self-activity which is performed for its own sake. In self-activity, the activity itself is the doer’s purpose, performed at will; it does not point outside of the subject’s aim — which is the doing in itself. Here a ‘means’ becomes an ‘end’, collapsed into one. In his late writings, Marx terms such activity as “self-purpose”. Thus, a consistent realization of this second kind of activity across the spectrum of all production would necessarily lead to the abolition of labour.

**The consequences of the abolition of labour**

Marx presents his communist dream in *The German Ideology* as a consequence of this abolition of labour: “For as soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. […] whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming


The desire for the realization of this utopian dream seems to be present in the work of artists who embrace relational aesthetics.\textsuperscript{24}

Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose work is fully supported and validated by the art market and art institutions, adamantly refuses to label as art many of his activities that occur within the institutional framework of contemporary art. During an art event organized by \textit{e-flux journal}\textsuperscript{25} in their New York storefront that focused on conversations on contemporary art during lunch and dinner sessions, Tiravanija did most of the cooking in a rudimentary, make-shift kitchen without proper equipments or even a fridge that made food preparation, cooking, and cleaning very labour intensive. He spent most of his time in the kitchen which allowed him not to engage in conversation or answer questions about his art. According to e-flux editor, Anton Vidokle, “When asked if what he was doing is art, Rirkrit said no, he was just cooking.”\textsuperscript{26} He took a similar approach to his work when he cooked and served food during a gallery exhibition at 303 Gallery, New York, in 1992. Vidokle speculates that the impetus behind Tiravanija’s rejection of seeing his activities as art (or as an artist doing something other than art within the space of art) stems from a desire to blur the lines between art and life and most importantly stems from “the ethos [of] the communist dream of non-alienated work”\textsuperscript{27}, a rejection of narrow professionalization.

Marx changed the meaning of the term labour as he developed his theory over time. In his early writings he equated labour with production and referred to instrumental production as ‘alienated labour’ or ‘external labour’. Nonetheless, starting around the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24} Relational aesthetics is a term coined by French art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud. It refers to fine art practices where the audience is envisaged as a community which participate in a shared activity conceived or defined by the artist. This social environment with its shared activity is the artwork.

\textsuperscript{25} “Time/Food”, organized by e-flux journal, Abrons Arts Center, New York, 2011.

\textsuperscript{26} Anton Vidokle, “Art without Work?”, \textit{e-flux journal}, no. 29 (November 2011).

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
middle of the *Economic-philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he used the term labour exclusively for instrumental production.  

Rirkrit Tiravanija serving at Time/Food, Abrons’ Arts Center, NYC, 2011. Photo: Mila Zacharias.

**Artistic activity as model for self-activity**

According to Marx, if instrumental labour is abolished, then human beings will develop themselves in all of their capacities and faculties by their own free choice and this will enable them to exercise their self-activity in all aspects of life. Marx speaks in this context of the “development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves.”

Marx used artistic activity as a model for self-activity, for this new form of non-labour-based productive activity. In *Grundrisse* Marx illuminates this concept using the example of the medieval hand-worker, and “he clearly defines artistic activity as an

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activity that is an end in itself, namely as non-instrumental activity. Free, non-instrumental production would be fully artistic in character.”

Preceding Marx, the French Social theorist, Charles Fourier, developed a theory for the ideal society at the turn of the 19th century. He envisioned play as the purest form of non-instrumental activity or production. Marx rejects the idea of drawing a parallel between play and artistic activity and their placing on equal ground, as he sees that play does not create anything, it has no material results. But most importantly, a key argument against play is that it is a sort of amusement, “whereas artistic activity often involves great intellectual efforts and pain, until a new creation — a picture, a statue, a poem, a symphony — is brought into the world.” The lack of true labour (intense effort, pain) renders play a naive activity that does not measure up to the demands of artistic creation. Marx thus objected to Charles Fourier’s model for higher, non-instrumental production: "Labour cannot become play, as Fourier would like." Marx speaks further in Grundrisse of creating new subjective and objective conditions, "in which labour would become travail attractif (attractive work), the self-realization of the individual, which in no way means that it would become mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier in a childishly naive manner conceives it. Truly, free work, e.g. composing, is at same time precisely the most damnable earnestness, the most intense effort.” Carl Andre expressed a similar sentiment when he talked about the reception of art demanding intense effort from the viewer as well: “One thing we have to know about art that it is not entertainment […] To experience a work of art truly is as hard a job as to make a work of art. It really is.”

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31 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 506.
34 Mark James, Upholding the Bricks, youtube video, directed by Mark James (1990 , London: Channel 4), documentary film.
Marx’s *Grundrisse* provides a fertile ground from which to inspire artists’ theoretical considerations relating to their work. In addition to discussing self-activity and non-instrumental production in detail, Marx introduces the concept of “living labour” that exists only in terms of potentiality, as action that can be located objectively only in “immediate bodily existence.” Marx defines living labour in opposition to labour objectified in capitalist production, where labour is reduced from an action to a thing, a qualitative transformation that is masked by the apparent equality of a quantitative exchange between things. According to Marx’s definition of living labour, “Labour is the living fire that shapes the pattern; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, their transformation by living time.” Interestingly, this is a passage in *Grundrisse* often quoted by Carl Andre in relation to his work. “Isolated from living labour, however, the productions of labour lost the quality of being themselves formed by living labour, resulting in an indifferent or arbitrary relationship within them [productions of labour] between material and form.” Marx uses the example of the form and material stuff of a tree to illustrate a naturally motivated relationship between form and material and he suggests that the same relationship can exist in relation to labour only if living labour, as a forming activity, both gave form to the material and materialized itself. However, within capitalism labour and capital are abstracted and generalized and labour becomes alienated from its product. “As such, labour, in the figure of the worker, looses all its living subjective particularity under conditions of industrial production.” Artistic activity as self-activity on the other hand holds the potential to establish a natural


relationship between form and material, giving form to the material and at the same time materialize itself (the artistic activity manifest itself, materializes, within the artwork).

1.2. Carl Andre’s “Marxist Matter”

Carl Andre’s art practice is evidently informed by his Marxist views, as demonstrated in numerous interviews and artist talks where he situates his work in relation to Marxist theory, making direct references to the writings of Marx. Andre is in dialogue with Marxism in two ways, both as an activist (such as his key role in the Art Workers’ Coalition) and as a sculptor. And though he was a key figure in the New Left inspired group, Art Workers’ Coalition, in 1969 in New York, a group which was much influenced by contemporary Marxist intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse, “Andre’s own perspectives tended to be defined in the terms of a more traditional Marxism.”

The Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) looked at artistic work in its economic dimensions as well according to its status and value. This short-lived open activist movement (existing from January 1969 to the end of 1973) that united critics, artists, writers, filmmakers and museum staff, sprang from the dissatisfaction of artists with the way their art was presented and viewed in a museum context and what little say they had in maintaining the integrity of their work once it left their studio. They also questioned whose work was presented in the museum (there was a notable absence of women artists and artists of colour in exhibitions of contemporary art) and how decisions about exhibitions were made. They also demanded a much more critical approach from museums regarding the Vietnam War. AWC’s activism led to some lasting changes in museum policies particularly regarding how museums interact with artists.

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Activism: Carl Andre and the Art Workers’ Coalition

Carl Andre, who was quite well known by the time the AWC was formed, lent his relative stature to the group as well as doing actual activist work with the movement. Based on his family background and upbringing, as well as on the grounds of using industrial materials in his sculptural work, he liked to align himself with working-class labourers: “My work derives from the working-class crafts of bricklaying, tile-setting, and stonemasonry.”\(^{43}\) This sounds like a credible statement, given that his grandfather was a bricklayer and his father was a draftsman for the shipbuilder Bethlehem Steel in Quincy, Massachusetts where Andre grew up and where the two major industries were in fact shipbuilding and granite quarrying. But Andre goes further in 1976 with a blunt general statement that “the position of the artist in our society is exactly that of an assembly line worker in Detroit.”\(^{44}\) This was a simplistic and reductive statement that “disregarded the distinct relations each has to free time and access to cultural capital.”\(^{45}\) The fact that Andre was a member of the middle-class who attended the prestigious Phillips Academy Andover, and he was free to make a choice of dropping out of the middle-class and identifying himself with the working class, speaks of his class privilege. However he felt strongly about his artistic labour and often felt alienated by art market forces and their effect on the work of art he produced, in terms of control and assigned value. This explains why he drew such a direct parallel between the work of an artist and the work of an assembly line worker, brothers united in their alienation of the product of their labour.

Andre was deeply committed to investigating the value of work and art, real life work and artistic work and their relationship. In 1976 the Tate Gallery in London presented a work of Carl Andre that drew intense public criticism and a nationwide debate on the value of art and labour. \textit{Equivalent VIII} consisting of 120 equal size firebricks laid on the


\(^{45}\) Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Carl Andre’s Work Ethic” in \textit{Art Workers} (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2009), 44.
floor in two layers without staggering or interweaving thus creating an antiutilitarian structure. Andre completed it in 1966 and it was purchased by Tate in 1972; it went on to be displayed in 1976. It drew the attention of the public after an article appeared in *The Sunday Times* about recent additions to the Tate Collection with a picture of *Equivalent VIII*. The ensuing public debate raised the issue that the sculpture (Tate Bricks as they became commonly known) cost more than a bricklayer would earn in a year. Other criticism centered on their ordinariness and claimed “that bricks are not art”, or “bricklaying is not art”\(^{46}\) (despite that Andre used bricks in a way bricklayers never use them; he simply arranged them on the ground and not vertically to build something of it.)

As Julia Bryan-Wilson summarizes in her book *Art Workers*: “Andre’s art, with its laconic placement of available industrial units—as well as its purchase and installation in a museum—appropriates for itself the mantle of labor, thereby destabilizing a value system that relies on a differentiation between “real” and artistic work.”\(^{47}\)

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Carl Andre, *Equivalent VIII*, 1966. Tate Modern, London, 1976. Firebricks, 120-unit rectangular solid, 2 high x 6 header x 10 stretcher, 2 1/2 x 4 1/2 x 9 (6.4 x 11.4 x 22.9) each, 5 x 27 x 90 1/8 (12.8 x 68.5 x 229) overall

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\(^{47}\) Bryan-Wilson, “Carl Andre’s Work Ethic,” 43.
In another work, Andre presented in 1970 in the Dawn Gallery, a commercial gallery in New York, he drew attention to the forces shaping the art market and artistic patronage by undermining it at the same time. He created an installation on the gallery floor, entirely made of found materials that he collected from the street, including thin strips of scavenged metal, copper wire, metal rods; altogether 22 different lines of found material were displayed. For this exhibition he radically changed how his art was sold and to whom. He sold his work per yard and requested that for every yard of the work the buyer pays 1% of their annual income, which made the work extremely expensive or a real bargain depending on the purchaser’s income. At the same time it also allowed that those who otherwise could not afford a work of art, would be able to own one. Speaking of his own art, he argued that “the material has value not because of any intrinsic quality it might possess or because of its selection and arrangement by the artist, but because of the wealth of the collector.” He claimed that “institutionalizing art severed objects from their maker” which he referred to as “slave practice”, meaning that his “works of art installed as trophies of acquisition [are] enslaved to a vision of sales.”

His strongly worded statements leave no doubt that Andre employs Marx’s conception of alienation (in which the wage labourer is alienated from the object he produces) with regard to his own experience as an artist operating within the art market. Importantly, Marx, Arendt and other theorists have long considered art as the very opposite of alienated labour. For Marx it is the ultimate self-purpose activity where ‘means’ becomes ‘end’.

The increasing institutionalization of art as well as its commodification in the 1960s and 70s brought awareness to the conditions and power structures operating in art institutions and also produced discontent among artists. Indeed, Art Worker Coalition where Carl Andre played a leading role and actively advocated to include the word ‘worker’ in the name of the coalition, aimed to address working conditions and compensation for artistic

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works. Andre worked to resolve financial inequalities among artists even suggesting state subsides. He participated in a panel at MoMA on “Art and Subsidy” April 14, 1970, which drew angry criticism from the museum director, John B. Hightower.

AWC tried to align itself with workers in other fields such as construction workers and steelworkers. Robert Morris and Carl Andre were particularly active in trying to build a broader coalition and make artists acceptable as working class people alongside steelworkers or construction workers, however their effort did not yield any results. Robert Morris built a massive installation in 1970 from construction materials in concert with construction workers but he closed his exhibition early when well publicized “hard hat riots” by construction workers appeared to be pro war and repressive. It never became apparent that there was anything common in the struggles and goals of artists and industrial workers. Reflecting on Robert Morris’s attempt to build solidarity with the construction workers Julia Bryan-Wilson comments:

To me this illustrates the contradictions of that moment: Inserting whatever you think of as working class procedures into your art doesn’t necessarily make you one of them. […] These moments of thwarted solidarity happened again and again, which brings up the issue of who is mobile enough to assume multiple identities, to move in and out of the category of “worker” at will. There is a privilege embedded in the decision to adopt that category as a performance rather than to see it as a category that exists within the capitalist system, one that hails certain subjects quite specifically and fixes them in place. It is like a costume that Andre could easily step out of. His level of cultural privilege and access is starkly unlike someone who is normally a mason.

Criticism: art worker as a hollow attempt at collectivity

Criticism was substantially directed at Andre, Morris and others, who tried to build a unified platform for equality and solidarity, from among their fellow artists. Some artists

49 Chris Mansour, “The Occupation of Art’s Labor.”

50 Ibid.
“viewed the moniker art worker as a hollow attempt at collectivity”\textsuperscript{51}, particularly those who considered artistic work as intellectual labour or expected art to be explicitly political. A particularly lucid summary of the problems with criticism directed toward Andre and other minimalists was presented in an article in \textit{The Fox}, a journal of the \textit{Art & Language} group, a shifting collaboration among conceptual artists, that Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn wrote in 1975: \textquotedblleft The split between art and real problems emerged in the 1960s in an essentially apolitical and asocial art—to the extent that for most artists, political engagement meant moving to an extra art activity.\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{52} In other words for artists such as Andre \textquotedblleft activism was an alibi for not making explicitly political art. […] These artists asserted themselves as workers precisely because their labor was no longer evident in their objects. Their politics were displaced onto their personal identities, enacted on the level of personal style rather than artistic content.\textsuperscript{53}

We must ask the question whether the fact that Andre had a singular focus on materiality as a sculptor situates his work as apolitical and asocial and indeed devoid of a legible engagement with labour. Andre aimed \textquotedblleft to bridge “historical materialism”—another term for Marxism—with actual, physical materiality.\textsuperscript{54} As he said in 1970, \textquotedblleft My art is atheistic, materialistic, and communistic\textquotedblright.\textsuperscript{55} He made another important statement on his position as an artist: \textquotedblleft Matter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position, I think essentially Marxist.\textsuperscript{56} In fact in \textit{Equivalent VIII (Tate Bricks as it is commonly known)} the simple act of the artist arranging a set of firebricks on the gallery floor became an important political act as it stirred a lively UK-wide debate about

\textsuperscript{51} Bryan-Wilson, “Carl Andre’s Work Ethic,” 56.

\textsuperscript{52} Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, “Don Judd”, \textit{Fox}, No. 2 (1975): 138.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 52.


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 56.

material, labour and value wherein the discourse was not limited to art professionals but engaged all segments of society. Though traditional artistic labour—the formation and creative transformation of the material by the artist’s hands using his skills—were not literally evident in Tate Bricks, the work clearly implied the notion of labour through the selection of materials that were industrially produced. Their unusual arrangement that clearly rendered originally useful and purposeful material as non-functional or useless in practical terms, and its placement within the context of a major public gallery in the UK, furthered this mindset. This demonstrates that - as opposed to the expectations of Beveridge and Burn - an artwork does not have to didactically or explicitly refer to political or social content in order to effectively mobilize political thoughts or social action.

Material, form and spatial situations: Social and political dimensions of Andre’s sculptures

Many of Andre’s works consist of horizontal arrangements of equal size industrial materials, steel plates, zinc plates, timber blocks, or firebricks laid on the gallery floor that have been manufactured according to the artist’s specifications. Andre created a series of Equivalents, simple, serial, geometric units directly placed on the ground, where viewers are invited to engage in a sensuous experience by walking on the work, physically engaging with it and becoming aware of the distinctive noise their steps produce. Andre’s 37 Pieces of Work (1969), the largest of his works in square footage, consist 216 plates of, variously, aluminium, steel, copper, magnesium, steel, and zinc, laid out on the ground over a thirty-six-square-foot area. It was created by the artist for his first solo exhibition in the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1970. The geometric composition of the work creates variations in light and dark as well as different sounds when someone walks on it. “The title evokes questions of labour at the very outset and plays with the indeterminacy of work as both a noun and a verb” as it refers both the 36 metal plates that makes each repeated pattern and to the piece as a whole.57

Carl Andre installing *144 Lead Square*, 1969. Dwan Gallery, New York, 1969. lead, 144 units, each 1 x 30 x 30, overall 1 x 365.8 x 365.8 cm when fully installed. MoMA, New York.

The notion of horizontality was central to Andre’s equalizing, egalitarian political vision; the use of ordinary materials implied an anti-elitist attitude, and the equivalent units that built up his works suggested an anti-authoritarian or anti-hierarchical approach. By placing the work on the floor, often in a way that necessitates that whoever steps into the gallery has no choice but to step on the work, Andre countered the usual restrictions of the “do not touch” policy galleries and museums traditionally impose on viewers. He made it a natural act to step on the work. Andre, who chose to cut into the space rather than cutting into the material\(^5\) created spatial situations. Though his work is not representational of human forms, the human being has a central responsibility in activating the spatial situation. His work comes alive through the viewer’s bodily engagement. According to Andre: “I make art work by doing art works but I think the work itself is never truly completed until somebody comes along and does artwork.

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\(^5\) In David Bourdon’s essay which was the lead article in the October 1966 issue of *Artforum*, Andre is quoted saying: “Up to a certain time I was cutting into things. Then I realized that the thing I was cutting was the cut. Rather than cut into the material, I now use the material as a cut in space.”
himself with that artwork.”59 This use of space, placement, choice of material and the necessary requirement for active engagement by the viewer gives Andre’s work its social and political dimensions. In the late 1960s, when the ethics of making art was at the centre of discourse, it gave his work a pronounced ethical dimension as well. Writing on Andre’s exhibition at the Guggenheim, Gregoire Müller noted in 1970, “Horizontality is almost an ethical limitation… Horizontality is what we know.”60 For Müller, horizontality, as it denounces hierarchy as well as monumentality, implies an ethics.

Carl Andre, *37 Pieces of Work*, 1969, at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, which is arranged alphabetically by the element symbol of the metals; aluminium, copper, steel, magnesium, lead and zinc (Al, Cu, Fe, Mg, Pb, Zn)

Andre’s choice of industrial material and his assertions of different identities and approaches toward his own work, (he called himself as artist, worker and artisan in various interviews), also speak of his interest in labour. Andre consistently and passionately argued for the priority of the materiality of his work. He rejected notions of


the ‘dematerialization of art’ or ‘de-objectification of the art object’ and stressed the inherent qualities of materials and the importance of the thing as it is. He asserted, “I want wood as wood and steel as steel, aluminum as aluminum, a bale of hay as a bale of hay.” Interviews with Carl Andre reveal an existential anxiety that is at the core of his interest in literal materiality and in materialism (the latter term was used to describe both a philosophical and political as well as an artistic attitude): “It’s a disaster when one realizes one is discontinuous [with the universe]. There is the self and all that is not the self. And sculpture has something to do with that fundamental feeling.” With his “wish to submit to the properties of materials” by rejecting the overt formation of his sculpture’s materials (beyond the acts of lifting, placing and arranging them in space), he asserts a “belief in materialism in a broadly philosophical sense, according to the ontological claim that matter exists prior to and determines consciousness.” Andre elaborated further on this subject in an interview with Phyllis Tuchman for Artforum in 1970: “I have avoided trying to create ideal surfaces that had to be maintained. As I’ve said I wanted to submit to the conditions of the world, such as if works were outside and they rusted, then they would rust. … Of course, it will [destroy the work] after three or four hundred years. But I will have long be dead and persons who are now living will long have been dead and the works will survive our lives certainly.” He noted that even

61 With Minimalism, Conceptual Art and Process Art on the forefront of contemporary art in the 1960s and 70s the material literality of the art object was in the centre of discourse. See Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art”, Art International 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31-36; Ursula Meyer, “De-Objectification of the Art Object,” Arts Magazine 43, no. 5 (Summer 1969): 20-22; Rosalind Krauss, “Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post 60s Sculpture,” Artforum 12, no. 3 (November 1973): 43-44. Despite vehement opposition from artists whose works were held up by critics as examples to prove their points, critics called for the use of term “dematerialization” simply because it did not fit their traditional idea of the material form of an art object (as if the material literality of the art object was in contradiction with its very existence).


64 Tuchman, “An Interview with Carl Andre,” 48.


if the material rusts away to a point of absolute obliteration, the grass where the work rusted would probably change in its pattern due to the high iron content in the soil. According to Andre, “nothing ever truly disappears.”\(^\text{67}\) One wonders, whether in leaving the materials that he uses as they are, making sure they do not need maintenance by humans, he is expressing a desire for permanence, ‘eternity’, a form of longevity through his artworks that points beyond his own finite human existence in the world. The things he makes confirm his own existence because they too exist. According to Andre, “The sense of one’s being in the world confirmed by the existence of things and others in the world. It has to do with life as opposed to death and a feeling of the true existence of the world in oneself.”\(^\text{68}\)

Andre’s desire to build a strong connection between the thing and the self, ideally collapsing them into one, explains the existence of Marx’s term, “living labour” within his philosophical approach toward his work. On multiple occasions, he quoted a passage from Marx’s *Grundrisse*, “Labour is the living fire that shapes the pattern ….”\(^\text{69}\) In fact it can be said that artistic labour has the potential to collapse the process of giving form to the material (materialization of living labour) and the thing (artwork) into one. But Andre’s use of industrial raw materials doesn’t allow for creating a natural, mutually dependent connection between form and material in relationship to labour. Clearly, capitalist, objectified labour is present in his work, as industrially manufactured raw materials are the starting point of each of his works. Given that he rejects making any traditional artistic transformations of the materials (physical shaping by the artist’s hand), and his own physical work with the material stays within the realm of lifting and carrying them, placing them on the floor in various patterns, arranging them, Andre makes the origin of the materials all the more explicit. But regarding Andre’s own Marxist interpretation of the material conditions of his work, it is important for him that he does

\(^{67}\) Ibid.

\(^{68}\) Ibid.

not work with materials that directly come from nature (e.g. a tree) but he uses materials (e.g. timber) that already were altered by labour to a certain degree but were not final commodity products. For example he installed 144 Lead Square in the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1969, and he referred to the material as “common metals of everyday economic life”. He maintained that his economic position as an artist was both as a producer and a capitalist, the latter in the sense that he had control over his own means of production as well as what he produced as artwork. However he sensed the contradiction between his desire to maintain living labour in his work and the fact that he used industrially produced materials that are obviously made by others. In a letter to Studio International, a British art journal, in 1976, he said “My work does joyfully celebrate the labour of others and the winning of human use value from indifferent matter.” This was the year when Andre’s Tate Bricks went on display and caused a UK-wide uproar which did not imply that the public, including bricklayers and working class people, felt their labour was joyfully celebrated or that ‘human use value’ manifested itself in Andre’s work. The real conditions of the materials from modern industrial production in the UK suggest that what were being made were indifferent materials produced by objectified labour, and not the manifestation of living labour, as Andre wanted to believe. The forming activity of living labour rests in the hands of Andre, the artist, however minimal or non-intrusive that labour may be, and is inevitably identified with the sensuous work of art. As Dominic Rahtz notes:

Andre’s materials are thus suspended between two conditions - the imagined temporal existence of materials defined by an originary and potential appropriation by the forming activity of living labour, identified with the sensuous work of ‘art’, and their real deadened material existence as the correlate of generalized labour in capitalist production. Materiality in these two senses is defined according to the presence or the absence of living labour, or ‘art’, as sensuous forming activity.

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2. Hanna Arendt: Theory of Action

2.1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt’s theory of action, under the term *vita activa*, as described in detail in her important book, *The Human Condition*, defines the fundamental forms of human activity on earth in relationship with political life and also from a phenomenological perspective. Her investigation stems from the origins of democracy and political philosophy in the Ancient Greek world. She points to Plato’s political philosophy as the starting point to replacing *polis* life, that is, direct citizenship and engagement in public life, with a new ideal of *vita contemplativa*, where public life is “directed by the superior insight of the philosopher.” She argues that *vita contemplativa* “has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher’s way of life.”\(^{73}\) The term *vita activa* has been used since antiquity but Arendt proposes a new definition of it in contradiction with its traditional interpretation because she disagrees with the hierarchical system inherent within it from its inception. The author suggests that her “use of term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior or inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.”\(^ {74}\)

For Hannah Arendt *vita activa* comprises three fundamental human activities: labour, work, and action. “They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.”\(^ {75}\)

**Labour: Humanity as Animal Laborans**

Labour is comprised of all the activity that is necessary to maintain life. According to Arendt, “its human condition is life itself.”\(^ {76}\) It corresponds to the biological processes,

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\(^{74}\) Ibid, 17.

\(^{75}\) Ibid, 7.

\(^{76}\) Ibid.
growth and eventual decay; it is perpetual within the cycle of life and death. Labour does not produce anything permanent as its efforts are quickly consumed, thus it must be constantly performed and renewed. Because labour is a necessity, it lacks freedom. Arendt refers to the roles of slaves in ancient Greek society that were necessary to free the household head to participate in the public political realm; he needed to be free to engage in activities “which were worth being seen, heard, and remembered.” The recognition of freedom as distinctively human prompted the Greeks to employ the institution of slavery in order to free their citizens from the necessity of labour. In light of this, Arendt criticizes Marx’s elevation of the animal laborans to a position of the highest form of human existence. For Arendt, as labour is necessary, it deprives humans from freedom, thus it stands at the lowest position in vita activa. Indeed, as labour never produces anything but life, Arendt relates it to the natural world and fertility. Labour is also performed in the private household as opposed to the action that happens in the public sphere. Arendt’s definition of labour is thus loosely gendered as fertility or household chores operated within the domain of women's labour.

It was exactly this recognition of the characteristics of women’s labour and its inherent invisibility and low status in society that prompted feminist artists in the 1960s and 70s to forcefully challenge the status quo and claim higher status for the work they do. For Lucy Lippard as a freelance critic, “criticism becomes housework, a job that is inherently feminized, a form of gendered service rather than making or creating.” Lippard’s redefinition of criticism as housework also challenges the nature of ‘housework’: how can (paid) writing be a ‘chore’? In the 1970s Lippard as a feminist critic increasingly focused on how women’s art was perceived and presented in the institution of arts. She wrote in 1971: “Women often have three jobs instead of two: their art, work for pay, and

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77 Ibid., 85.
79 Ibid., 165.
the traditional unpaid ‘work that’s never done’.” This “never done” work was brought to the forefront by Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s performance series Maintenance Art in 1973 at the Hartford Wadsworth Atheneum. She proposed to make the unseen labour visible within the space of the art museum. She scrubbed floors, dusted display cases, and mopped stairs. As an artist she was virtually invisible as there was no announcement that she was an artist or other sponsor of another official event that would indicate she was not a regular maintenance worker of the museum. Ukeles’s performance was in direct dialogue with Hannah Arendt’s definition of labour, involving necessary daily performances of repeated chores with fleeting effects, versus work that is world-making, transforms nature, and entails the fabrication of worldly, tangible things that suggest permanence.

Here it is important to note that according to Arendt “works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things” and “their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages.”

Within the work of art “something immortal [is] achieved by mortal hands.” But, as Julia Bryan-Wilson points out:

Ukeles subverts this notion by insisting that her ephemeral performance, her ‘unseen’ bodily labor, becomes art within the space of the institution.

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81 Arendt, The Human Condition, 167.

82 Ibid, 168.

83 Ukeles writes in her “MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition ‘CARE’;”

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I “do” Art.

Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art. I will live in the museum and I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition. (Right? or if you don’t want me around at night I would come in every day) and do all these things as public Art activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls (i.e. “floor paintings, dust works, soap-sculpture, wall-paintings”) cook, invite people toe at, make agglomerations and dispositions of all functional refuse.

The exhibition area might look “empty” of art, but it will be maintained in full public view.
Recalling the slogans of Women’s Strike in 1970, Ukeles asks: Who is going to pick up the garbage after the revolution?\textsuperscript{84}

Women artist turned domestic labour, such as ironing, dusting, cleaning, and child rearing increasingly into subject matter for feminist art in the 1970s. Other aspects of women’s work, including crafts such as weaving, crocheting, and knitting, were also reinvested with value and brought into the realm of art. Faith Wielding’s large scale, immersive installation \textit{Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)} as part of the 1971-72 \textit{Womanhouse} project (part of the California Institute of Arts Feminist Art Program),\textsuperscript{85} examined the connection between female labour, domesticity, and craft. According to the recollection of Faith Wielding, \textit{By Our Own Hands}, in 1977:

Womanhouse began in an old deserted mansion on a residential street in Hollywood and became an environment in which the age-old female activity of homemaking was taken to fantasy proportions. Womanhouse became the depository of daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away.\textsuperscript{86}

\textbf{Work: Humanity as \textit{Homo Faber}}

According to Arendt, work, as opposed to labour which relates to the biological necessities of human life, and “is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever recurring life cycle.”\textsuperscript{87} Work is world-making, it has a beginning and an end, and its result is a man-made thing. The human condition of work is worldliness.\textsuperscript{88} Each individual life plays out within the borders of this man-made “artificial” world but

\textsuperscript{84} Bryan-Wilson, \textit{Art Workers}, 166.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Womanhouse} was a project conceived by Paula Harper, an art historian, as part of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of Arts when the school was still under construction and students, under the direction of Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, met at private residencies of students.

\textsuperscript{86} Faith Wielding, \textit{By Our Own Hands} (Los Angeles: Double X, 1977).

\textsuperscript{87} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 7.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
“this world [is] meant to outlast and transcend them all.” Arendt also points out the transformative power of work, that work is distinctively human as it does not conform to the demands of nature. On the contrary, it transforms nature. Humanity in this mode of activity is *homo faber* who creates things, institutions and spaces. As work is ultimately governed by human ends and intentions, it is under human control and as such it entails a certain level of freedom. But Arendt also reminds us that work still responds to certain necessities. It is instrumentalized action. Work is the means to the end, to achieve the things to be fabricated. It is not an end in itself, thus it cannot be completely free. While labour is delegated to the private realm as it serves individual life needs, work produces a common world and as such it is inherently public. While work is not the kind of activity Arendt relates to politics, the products of work, the physical man-made world with its institutions and spaces, are preconditions for the existence of a political community.

**Action: Humanity as Zoon Politikon**

Action is the highest form of human activity in *vita activa*. According to Arendt, “action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” This plurality is the condition of all political life. The characteristics of action are publicity, plurality, ineliminable freedom, and a sense of initiative, to set something into motion, “the capacity of beginning something anew.” For action to take place, and be meaningful, there is a need for others to witness, to be present to see it and thus give meaning to it. Action acquires its meaning and reveals the identity of the actor in the context of human plurality as an interaction between men.

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
Rebecca Belmore’s performance work in 1991, 1992 and 1996, Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother, exemplifies the notion of publicity, plurality, and setting something into motion as inherent political action. But most importantly Belmore’s act powerfully speaks of the role of witness. Conceived in 1991 as her response to the ‘Oka Crisis’, the struggle of the Mohawk Nation of Kanesatake to maintain their territory, Belmore created a large scale wooden megaphone that she took into many First Nations communities across Canada - reservation, rural, and urban - and used as she asked people to speak to the land. Belmore says, “I was particularly interested in locating the Aboriginal voice on the land. Asking people to address the land directly was an attempt to hear political protest as poetic action.” Belmore’s work also points to speech as the initiating act of every political change.


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92 The Oka Crisis was a violent and highly publicized land dispute between the Mohawk community of Kanesatake and the town of Oka, Quebec, over a planned golf course that would had extended into the traditional land and sacred burial ground of the Mohawk Nation. The conflict began on July 11, 1990 and lasted until September 26, 1990.

For Arendt speech is central to action as it reflects the communicative and disclosing quality of action. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”\textsuperscript{94} This insertion, initiating action, is the embodiment of freedom as it is “not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work.”\textsuperscript{95}

Speech is also essential to transform the private realm into public. According to Arendt “public” signifies two closely related phenomena. “It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.”\textsuperscript{96} This appearance, that something can be seen and heard, by others and ourselves, constitute reality.\textsuperscript{97} Matters of private life can be transformed into public by speech act, e.g. storytelling, or artistic transposition. This transformation, deprivatized and deindividualized, gives private matters a shape to fit them for public appearance.\textsuperscript{98} Second, the term “public” signifies the world itself, composed of human artifacts, institutions and spaces of the man-made world, “in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it.”\textsuperscript{99}

\textit{Vita activa} is the labour of our body, the work of our hands, and our actions - speech and deeds - in the political public sphere. One can see an emergence of Arendt’s influence, or in some cases, traces of such an influence, in current contemporary art practice whether in the form of artistic work referencing Arendt’s ideas or in the use of her scholarship to understand contemporary art. One possible explanation for this is the growing interest in art’s political dimension over the past decade. The proliferation of new artistic forms such

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{94} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 176.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 177.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 50.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 52.
\end{itemize}
as social practice\textsuperscript{100}, relational aesthetics\textsuperscript{101}, and community-based art\textsuperscript{102}, that all incorporate social interactions or are explicitly political, makes Arendt’s scholarship all the more relevant in order to understand how these art practices function in society.

Irmgard Emmelhainz points out the following in this regard in *Art and the Cultural Turn: Farewell to Committed, Autonomous Art?*: “In a context in which the creative, political, and mediatic fields are intrinsically linked, contemporary cultural practices point toward a new social order in which art has merged with life, privileging lived experience, collective communication and performative politics.”\textsuperscript{103}

Collective communication and performative politics are at the core of the activities of YES! Association, a self-declared feminist separatist association for art workers, based in Sweden but open to participation by artists anywhere in the world. In 2012 they participated with a project in the exhibition *Anti-Establishment*, curated by Johanna Burton, at CCS Bard Galleries, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Their work for the exhibition consisted of *Smoking Area*, painted signage on the gallery floor to mark a smoking area. They also produced a reading/speech/performance titled *Hostilities/Events/Inclusion/Assimilation/Disruptions and Beginnings*, performed by three artists from the group within this smoking area. The performance was based on and directly referenced Hannah Arendt’s work, *The Human Condition*.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{100} Social Practice as art practice is built upon collaborative social engagement and seeks community partnerships.

\textsuperscript{101} Relational aesthetics is a term coined by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud to define artistic practices that consider the whole of human relations and their social context instead of individual studio work in the private sphere of the studio.

\textsuperscript{102} The purpose of community-based art is collaborative creation with members of a community to raise awareness about social, political, and environmental issues and address questions of identity and empowerment through art. The artist’s role is being community educator and facilitator.

\textsuperscript{103} Irmgard Emmelhainz, “Art and the Cultural Turn: Farewell to Committed, Autonomous Art?”, *e-flux journal*, no. 42 (February 2013)

\textsuperscript{104} see http://www.foreningenja.org/en/projekt/smoking-area/
2.2. Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s Maintenance Art: Transforming Labour into Action

The work of Mierle Lederman Ukeles’s concerns daily survival, the everyday routines of life, and comments on its dignity and value and its ultimate necessity to maintain life. Through her work, performances and interventions she argues that without this labour the human race and our planet would quickly reach its demise. Still, once can observe, society places relatively little value on this labour which hovers on the margins of our consciousness and never achieving due recognition.

In 1969, following the birth of her first child, Lederman Ukeles wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! “Care,” A Proposal for an Exhibition.* In it she proposed a series of performances doing manual labour such as cleaning, dusting, and mopping in the museum space. After continuous rejection from galleries and museums for four years, Lucy Lippard invited her to participate in a traveling exhibition of women conceptual artists that was shown in the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1973. By that time Ukeles had three small children.

Her Manifesto had two parts, ‘Ideas’, and the ‘Proposal’ and claimed both parts, (the ideas and the physical act of maintenance), as ‘Art’. As Sherry Buckberrough and Andrea Miller-Keller write:

> She [Laderman Ukeles] overturned the avant-garde presumption that freedom in art is grounded in originality — that is, the ‘artist-genius’ never repeats (him)self. This prevailing artistic mandate was in conflict with the ethics and realities of motherhood, which require constant repetition of mundane tasks to support a dependent human life. … The premises of Part I of the Manifesto are dual. Death instincts are opposed to life instincts. To these psychoanalytic extremes she correlates counterparts in the areas of work {avant-garde art vs. maintenance

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105 see http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf

of the species), political philosophy (individuality vs. unification), and urban planning (development vs. maintenance). The performances Lederman Ukeles proposed in her manifesto centered on repetitive maintenance work: personal, general and also earth (waste) maintenance. She performed personal duties of housekeeping (cleaning, cooking, minor renovating) within the museum. She also conducted interviews with various people about the maintenance aspects of their work. The third part, earth maintenance, proposed that refuse of all kinds (trash, polluted air, polluted water) be scientifically rehabilitated on the premises of the museum.

Because by 1969 none of the museums Ukeles contacted was responsive, she put the Manifesto to work in her home setting. Maintenance Art: Personal Time Studies: Log (February 21-25, 1973) recorded the various tasks she performed throughout the day as wife, mother, artist. In Dressing to Go Out / Undressing to Come In, also in 1973, she recorded through images the frequently repeated and seemingly impossible task of preparing three small children to leave and return to their apartment during the cold winter. When she could finally exhibit this work, “a rag hanged by a chain from the piece, mandating the physical responsibility inherent in the stewardship of the object: it came with its own maintenance system.”

Ukeles’s actions at the Wadsworth included the following performances: Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object (1973) in which Ukeles chose to clean the glass vitrines that housed an ancient female mummy. An ancient mode of preservation of primary waste (human remains), a mummy display in our culture is treated as work of art and as a site of reverence. In the performance, which examined the interrelatedness of life, maintenance, preservation, production, and creation, Ukeles highlighted the division of labour that exists in a museum. The cleaning of vitrines are the job of a trained maintenance person but the cleaning of the art object is the job of a trained conservator. Ukeles choreographed

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
a ritual of three cleansings, the first by the maintenance worker. Then Ukeles, the contemporary artist, stamped the vitrine and through her touch it became an art object. Once it became an art object, it was the job of the trained conservator to clean it.

In *The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security* (1973) Ukeles took control temporarily of the entire museum by taking control of the keys causing outrage among curators and museum staff when the doors to their offices were closed. Museum visitors could choose to stay locked in the museum for an unspecified period of time or they could choose to leave. This reversal of the hierarchy of authority brought to consciousness the inner workings of the power relations in a museum.

*Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973) and *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside* (1973) were physically gruelling tasks. In these performances, each of which lasted four hours, the artist continuously scrubbed floors after each visitors' steps using water, stone, and cloth diapers, that conservators used to clean work of arts. After the performance the artist stamped each used diaper “*Maintenance Art Original*”. In these performances, Ukeles transformed labour as defined by Arendt into work, artwork. But she did more than that. Though her performances of washing the museum floor were silent and her presence was not announced by the museum as an artist at work, the discourse (speech act) she generated, with her radical maintenance art, brought domestic and invisible work from the private realm into the realm of public political discourse. Her longstanding work *Touch Sanitation*[^109] with New York City Department of Sanitation acted to keep urban cleaning and the maintenance of urban life continuously in public discourse and highlight the dignity of repetitive manual labour essential to the functioning of the city.

[^109]: Ukeles shakes hand with each and every worker in New York City Department of Sanitation (over 8,500 workers) and thank them for their work. She is their artist-in-residence (unpaid) since 1977.
In 2013, in a post-Sandy\textsuperscript{110} New York, Ukeles asked a series of questions of workers at the Brooklyn Museum, (a security guard, a window washer and a sanitation worker), as well as architects and city planners: How do you personally survive? What do you need to do to keep going? What happens to your dreams and to your freedom when you do the things you have to do to keep surviving? What keeps New York City alive? What does

\textsuperscript{110} Reference to Hurricane Sandy that caused significant damage in New York City in October 2012.
the city need to do to survive after Sandy?\textsuperscript{111} Her 15 minute interviews with voluntary participants were conducted in front of an audience in the Brooklyn Museum as well as recorded on video. While one would expect references for the public trauma of the hurricane, the interviews are poignant testimonies of the heroic efforts that are needed to get through life even without the aftermath of a hurricane. Compared to the stories interviewees shared of experiences of deteriorating health, surviving cancer and gruelling chemotherapy, and losing loved ones, the ravages of the hurricane seem minuscule. The interviews also demonstrate how people gain strength and resilience from small actions of kindness. Letting personal narratives by first person accounts be heard by the public, Ukeles as an artist acts as a facilitator in the transformation of private stories and experiences into public accounts. She propels them from the private realm into the public; into political discourse, giving dignity and remembrance to individual experiences, and fosters the recognition of the labour necessary for the maintenance of life is dignified work.

3. Jacques Rancière: Nights of Labour and the Radical Redefinition of the Worker

3.1. Introduction

While Marx looked at labour and the working class in the context of their economic conditions and Arendt studied labour and action from a phenomenological point of view, Jacques Rancière brings a radically different perspective to the subject: he looks at the worker in the context of his aspirations, at the worker’s imaginative vision for his future. He demonstrates through close readings of the works of a group of worker-writers, among them Jérôme-Pierre Gilland, Charles Poncy and Louis Gabriel Gauny, from the era leading to the 1830 and 1948 French revolutions, that nineteenth-century workers were not a homogeneous class who only fought for better working conditions and decent wages. He also rejects “mainstream historians’ simplificatory nostalgia who look back to pre-industrial, artisanal labour as a source of authentic and homogeneous working-class culture.”

Rancière argues that nineteenth-century workers sought out the company of proletarian intellectuals, artists, poets, and writers, who were able to put into words their desires and their longings for a different life, their struggles regarding intellectual life. These workers and worker-intellectuals lived their true life during the night that they devoted to writing, poetry, and discourse. Instead of sleep and rest to renew their bodies for the next day’s physical work, these workers chose to stay awake and spend the night with intellectual labour. They dreamt of a future marked by a just society that allows them to escape the drudgery of daily manual labour and allows for the time of intellectual pursuits as the ideal form of their existence. Rancière quotes nineteenth-century French socialist

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feminist and seamstress, Jeanne Deroin: "The necessity of working made me realise that I, deprived of wealth, had to renounce knowledge, happiness."\textsuperscript{114} The shift from a conventional life goal to a desire for knowledge, knowledge as an infinite process instead of an end goal, is considered real happiness.\textsuperscript{115} Gauny expressed similar sentiments, “The working class want \textit{an entirely new life}, a life of religion and poetry. It needs greatness, glory, artists who exalt and captivate it. The labourer wants festivals.”\textsuperscript{116} In the spring of the 1848 French Revolution, Gauny enthusiastically imagined a future society full of lively “circulation of discourses” as a “universe populated with spoken words.”\textsuperscript{117} Instead of the material improvement of the existing world, these nineteenth-century workers dreamt of an entirely new world, and (at least) during the nights they redrew the lines of the division of labour. Through their intellectual work they created and participated in a new, possible world.

Both Jeanne Deroin and Louis Gabriel Gauny as well as numerous other worker-intellectuals whose writings Rancière studied were identified as Saint-Simonians\textsuperscript{118}, a group which gave a spiritual dimension to their ideas and aspirations. Their aspirations and their struggle for intellectual life was often expressed in conjunction with a deeply felt sorrow as they faced the realities of their life, the monotony and drudgery of daily work, their low status and oppression in society. Referencing and paraphrasing Gauny, Ranciere writes, “industry and the flesh are the very things from which he despairs of being redeemed: the daily-recurring constraint of selling his liberty with his labor

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[115] Ibid., 111.
\item[116] Ibid., 214.
\item[117] Ibid., 123.
\item[118] Saint-Simonianism was a secular religion and a French political and social movement of the first half of the nineteenth century, inspired by the ideas of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). Due to its numerous controversial doctrines particularly regarding the role of women, it had not gained significant number of followers. Though it is often referenced in the pre-history of the Marxist concept of social class, according to Oliver Davis, Rancière is the first who studied the movement and its impact on nineteenth-century social movements in depth. Davis, \textit{Jacques Rancière}, 52.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
There was a longing for social discourse, “of finding fraternal souls with whom to share the suffering.” He further cites that, “(you) who have been beaten down and made sorrowful by misfortune, come and unload your sorrows in the bosom of our fathers, come to our place, you will find friends to console you and gaiety will be reborn in your hearts.”

Rancière frequently contrasts the pleasure of intellectual and aesthetic pursuits with the pain felt by these workers destined for a life of manual labour. However once the pain and sorrow were expressed in songs, poetry, and other forms of writings, they too gained an aesthetic dimension. In an interview in 2009 on the occasion of the release of the Hindi language edition of *The Nights of Labour*, Rancière states:

Finding pleasure in sorrow, finding pleasure in pain is indeed the very definition of a certain form of aesthetic pleasure. For instance, the very definition of classical tragedy is precisely a certain form of performance which deals with painful events, but which at the same time is destined to bring about pleasure for people. But it also means that in the classical order only people of privilege, or people of leisure and culture are able to enjoy such sorrows and to take pleasure in pain. What was important in the 1830s in the experience of the workers was the fact that they were living at a time of the great romantic poets and writers. These poets were for example writing about sorrow, the sorrow of being born, the sorrow of having nothing – no place in society, no place in the world. At the same time it was pleasure, the pleasure to write those lines or those verses about the sorrow of being born, the sorrow of having no place in society etc, and what was interesting for me was the way in which those workers could take up this paradoxical pleasure. [...] So it was quite important for them, I think, to rephrase the condition of people who were doomed to the mere production of life, and to rephrase each life as a kind romanticist sorrow – what a pity I was born in the world that had no place for me. The important thing is the possibility to exchange

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120 Ibid., 170.
121 Ibid., 187. (quoting Victor Meunier)
one sorrow for another, and in a sense the pleasure in literature and culture is the ability to exchange one sorrow for another sorrow.\footnote{123}

### 3.2. Liza Lou: Pleasure and Pain

Liza Lou expresses similar sentiments to that of Rancière stating that “pleasure and pain are my themes.”\footnote{124} Her works are extremely labour intensive to make as well as being time consuming. She uses small beads to create large-scale installations or large sculptural works. Her first such work, *Kitchen*, is a life size suburban kitchen where every item in it is completely covered with glittery beads including each appliance, every plate and cup, food on the plates and grocery items in the fridge. Even the water flowing from the tap is recreated with blue strings of beads. It took the artist four years from 1991 to 1995 to glue beads on every square inch of surface in a kitchen while working odd jobs daytime to support herself. Lou’s *Kitchen* was shown in the New Museum’s landmark exhibition “A Labor of Love” in 1996 curated by Marcia Tucker. Tucker noted at that time:

> One reason that crafts, decorative arts and folk art are seen as outside the high art tradition is because non-artists don’t have the same kind of respect for things that we could make ourselves (or think we could, given enough time, patience and money!). Still hanging in the closet is a hand-me-down of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism, the notion that artists must be better, smarter, on a higher plane and closer to The Truth than mere mortals.\footnote{125}

By presenting over 100 works from artists and craftspeople Tucker critiqued the separation and hierarchization of art making. The exhibition was her major foray “into a long-term investigation of the ways in which art and daily life—from the mundane to the profound—are inextricably interwoven.”\footnote{126} Liza Lou herself experienced intense criticism during her studies at the San Francisco Art Institute for the use of beads in her

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\footnote{126} Ibid.
art practice, accusations that she “transgressed into the realm of craft.”\textsuperscript{127} She eventually left the program and embarked on creating her first large scale work, *Kitchen*, which made her instantly famous.


**Process vs. Completion**

While Lou created *Kitchen* entirely by herself, her second work *Back Yard*, which recreated a backyard picnic set and was exhibited in the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1998, was made with the help of her friends and many volunteers. Nevertheless it still took three years and 30 million beads to complete. With reference to the background to this remarkable work, during her travel in Europe before she went to art school, Lou was “inspired by the idea that people would labor over a cathedral for hundreds of years, and the element of time held a real fascination for her.”\textsuperscript{128} When working on *Kitchen*, the very first item she covered with beads, using toothpicks to apply the glue and a tweezer to


\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
place the beads, was a soup can which makes a clear reference to Andy Warhol. As Lou commented, “I liked the idea of slowing down pop art.”

Liza Lou at work, image credit: L&M Arts

In Lou’s work, curiosity (“What will it look like?”) plays a role in her choosing of a painstakingly slow process of art making, just as much as does her fascination with labour and time. Speaking of time, she says, “I am very interested in labor, in the accrual of time and material, pattern and repetition.” During the making of Kitchen Lou also gained a better understanding of what really mattered for her in the making of the work: “As time went on, the process itself began to take on real significance for me, and I realized that applying beads was not a means to an end, or about completion.” She started doing performances in the work, sitting and kneeling inside the work and

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.


applying beads with a tweezer; the labour became a performance. She commented, “I felt a connection to artists who worked with boredom and endurance.”

Liza Lou’s Work Ethic and its Religious Origin

Lou often refers to her upbringing (“I was raised in the church”) as a significant influence in shaping her approach to art practice. Asked in an interview if a ‘Protestant work ethic’ is at play in her work —meaning that “to realize anything fundamentally one has to work, put time in, suffer and, in a way, there’s a kind of punishment involved there”, she readily responded, “Absolutely. I am attracted to the difficulty, the tedium, the seeming impossibility of the task.” But she rejects the notion of catharsis, the pleasure from pain Rancière referred to in relation to classical tragedy, as something to be gained from the slow, painstaking process of making her work: “Catharsis would suggest an end in sight. I like to keep the wound fresh, and so I keep working.” A work that resonates with this sentiment, *Comfort Blanket*, 2005, made with cotton and glass beads,

133 Ibid.


135 Ibid., 13.

136 The notion of work ethic refers to the intrinsic value of work, meaning that labour for its own sake is intrinsically virtuous. Theoretical discussions around work ethic has its origins in German sociologist Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* published in 1905. Attitudes toward work have changed in many ways since antiquity often under the influence of religion and work ethic as a positive moral value associated with work is a relatively new concept. In Ancient Greece the Greek word for work was *ponos*, taken from the Latin *poena*, which meant sorrow and work was for slaves. It was only in the Protestant Reformation that physical labor became both culturally acceptable as well as required for all persons, even the wealthy.

137 Social psychologists study the development of work ethic and the forces that shapes people’s attitudes toward work. They generally agree that work ethic, as internalized value, is culturally determined and heavily influenced by someone’s upbringing and the influences of family and significant adults in someone’s life during the teenage years.


As in many regions in the world religion had/have centuries of influence on local culture, thus religious influences can be often pointed out. For example Lucy Lippard refers to Eva Hesse’s Judeo-Puritan work ethic when she cites Hesse saying “If it isn’t difficult, it isn’t worth doing.” in *Eva Hesse*, New York: New York University Press, 1976), 217.

and measuring the size of a baby blanket, was conceived by the artist as a container for
grief. As a metaphor for a child’s first object of comfort that is entrusted with the child’s
secrets, stories, and tears, it is torn in the centre. A comfort blanket is also a child’s first
art object, and according to Liza Lou, art is also a form of comfort, “it gives a tremendous
sense of purpose.”\textsuperscript{139} She realized early on that “art does not require any money, just time
and a lot of effort.”\textsuperscript{140} This gives Lou the opportunity to see the world in her own way, to
go into her room and make something that she has total control over.\textsuperscript{141} Liza Lou sees
artistic labour as a rewarding autonomous activity whose reward is in fact autonomy
itself.

\textbf{Being Complicit: The Artist as Capitalist and ‘Global Player’}

While Lou worked on her first bead-covered installations and sculptures all by herself,
she dramatically changed her working methods and direct involvement with her work
when she moved her studio in 2005 from the US to South-Africa near Durban in
KwaZulu-Natal, a province which is home to some of the most accomplished of the Zulu
bead-workers. There she often employs dozens of skilled and experienced craftspeople of
the Zulu tribe to make her work. Her large scale glass-bead “carpets”, glued on
aluminum panels in multiple layers, then partially chiselled away to create a three
dimensional effect, are especially labour intensive, requiring months of labour by a small
army of assistants.

Transforming herself into business- and project manager and benefiting from cheap third
world labour, with this new approach to her practice, Lou seems to embrace the current
mode of production of global capitalism, transplanting new forms of distribution
regarding globalized labour into her artistic practice. This is all the more problematic as
her move to South Africa came after she had achieved significant worldwide recognition

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.,20.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
and commercial success through commissions and had received the MacArthur
Foundation “genius” grant of $500,000 in 2002.

When questioned on employing an exploitive, capitalist mode of production, she deflects
criticism by stressing that she is doing “good”. As her techniques differ from traditional
beading — she glues the beads instead of threading them — she says her move to South
Africa “was welcomed because of its outreach component: none of her workers had
previously held a regular job (she does not refer to them as “beaders” but considers them
artisans whose visual thinking she is helping to expand). Her objective was to develop an
economically sustainable project and provide much-needed training, while creating her
own original artworks.”¹⁴² It is surprising that she is not pressed further on just how much
benefit this new skill actually brings to her skilled crafts workers.

It is a fundamental rule of economic empowerment and capacity building through
training that once the knowledge transfer is completed and the initial impetus that
prompted this knowledge transfer ceases to be present, the new skill allows the locals to
use it for self-sustenance. Therefore, if Liza Lou chose to relocate her studio from South
Africa to another country, she would leave behind craftspeople she had trained in gluing
beads, but it is unlikely there would be any local market for them to employ this skill in
an adapted way. Indeed, the tourism economy is built on promoting the traditional skill
and heritage that cannot be acquired anywhere else. The tourists who visit KwaZulu-
Natal are looking for so-called authentic souvenir and crafts that speak of the heritage of
the region, which is the highly valued traditional craft of beading incorporating intricate
patterns and elaborate colour codes. Should Liza Lou leave, the technique of bead gluing
would become a dead skill. It benefits the locals, her employees, only while her studio is
there. On the other hand Lou benefits from the sophisticated skill and exceptional manual
dexterity her workers have already acquired through practicing their traditional craft,
before she moved her studio near Durban. Closer to home, the Navajo or other American
Indian tribes with their traditional craft of beading might well have provided just as much

immediate skilled labour for Lou’s need but at a much higher labour cost. Her arguments regarding doing good disguises the shrewd manager’s interest in pure economic benefit for herself.

**A Romantic Image: Manager as Master, Employees as Artisans United in Harmony and Teamwork**

Liza Lou’s insistence on noble motives for having her studio in South Africa and referring to her employees as artisans as opposed to “beaders”, promotes an enduring romantic image of the artisanal workshop. After hearing Liza Lou speaking of carrying out her work in her studio near Durban with the help of skilled craftspeople, mostly women, “who often sing as they work,”¹⁴³ Linda Nochlin writes:

> One has a vision of harmony and teamwork, of the empowering psychic energy produced by demanding craftsmanship well done. One thinks back to the craftsmen’s shop of the Middle Ages, to the hopeful and productive ateliers of the talented and ambitious women in the Arts and Crafts movement in this country early in the 20th century, of Womanhouse with its fried egg kitchen and menstruation bathroom, of Judy Chicago and her band of volunteers working together to create that pioneering feminist installation, The Dinner Party in the early days of the Women’s Art Movement, or of the group co-operation involved in Liza Lou’s own, earlier, large scale installation, Back Yard in the late nineties.¹⁴⁴

This sweeping, hyperbolic image conflates various modes of production over the centuries, and their corresponding power structures, under an utopian desire and imagined ideal of harmony and teamwork. What Rancière pointed out in Nights of Labor is that the idealized artisan, the skilled craftsperson, be it the carpenter, seamstress, weaver, jeweller, locksmith or stonemason, did not see their own conditions as ideal. During most of the nineteenth century, industrial production in Europe was largely carried out by skilled craftsmen working in ateliers under the direction and supervision of

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¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
a master, the owner of the atelier. A new working class of unskilled or low skilled labourers replaced them when machines became affordable and widespread. As Rancière demonstrated through the writings of worker-intellectuals who were skilled craftspersons working for others as wage labourers, those working in ateliers for a master saw their work as daily drudgery and often harboured grudges against their employer, the master. Through claiming their own agency, writing songs, poetry, journal articles or treatises during the night, (thus engaging in intellectual / artistic labour), they expressed their longing for the exact same thing Liza Lou values so much and claims for herself, albeit in a highly complicated manner: the autonomy of labour.

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146 Marlow, “The Gilded Cage,” 19. Speaking of art and being an artist, Liza Lou says:” It’s a way of seeing the world, it’s a way of reinventing the world. [ ] It’s really exciting to be able to decide you want to see things in a certain way so you go ahead and do that. And on that page you have total control.”
Chapter 2 // Means = Ends: Labour as Art Practice

All of the three theorists whose perspectives on labour were presented in the previous chapter give artistic labour-a special place in their theories. For Marx, the work of the artist is the model of self-activity, the desired form of non-alienated productive activity, where means and ends are collapsed into one, and the activity itself is the doer’s purpose. Marx envisioned a future society without instrumental, alienated labour, as the most developed, highest form of society. In that society “free, non-instrumental production would be fully artistic in character.”

For Arendt, “works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things”, due to their outstanding permanence, and the fact that they are “untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes”. They are therefore not subject to daily use (in a strictly utilitarian sense). In works of art “the thing-world reveals itself spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings.” Arendt originates the source of the work of art in human thought; they are expressions of feelings reified through transfiguration and metamorphosis that become ‘being things’, fabricated things of thoughts, “through the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of human hands, builds the other durable things of the human artifice.” It is important to note that Arendt sees a ‘deadness’ in art, until it comes in contact again with a life (a human being) who is willing to resurrect it. Art is alive in those moments when it is experienced and it is meaningful only in that context of human connection. This necessity of human

149 Ibid.
150 Ibid., 168.
151 Ibid., 169.
152 Ibid.
connection is similar to that of ‘action’ in Arendt’s Theory of Action, which requires an interconnectedness of human beings that exists in the public realm, the political sphere.

Rancière presents artistic/intellectual labour as the highest form of existence; it is equal with freedom, is a source of pleasure (even if this pleasure arises from sorrow) and it is the ultimate aspiration of workers/wage labourers. It aims “to become entirely human, with all the possibilities of a human being.”\footnote{Liang, “Interview with Jacques Rancière.”} Rancière also points out that intellectual emancipation starts with equality, the equality of capacities regardless of how material conditions can make it difficult for someone to practice those capacities. In 	extit{Nights of Labor}, he also challenges the notion that labour completely exhausts the body by showing that a group of daytime manual labourers also lived the intellectual nights of the writer. He suggests that intellectual emancipation requires the subversion of time, that “at the heart of emancipation is precisely the idea that time is everyday … and what happens in the here and now.”\footnote{Ibid.} Rancière says:

> When I tried to think of the idea of intellectual emancipation, there is no distinction between the idea that – now we are struggling, now we are constructing and now we are preparing the future and the future will be wonderful. The art of emancipation is precisely to get out of this relationship between means and ends.\footnote{Ibid.}

For these theorists, artistic labour is highly valued and worth pursuing, though for different reasons, but a common element in their philosophies is that artistic labour is autonomous. Speaking personally now, as an artist, I want to assert that the autonomy of artistic labour appeals to me greatly as it allows for the expression of the intrinsic value(s) that I myself associate with labour. (The intrinsic value of labour differs from person to person).
My art practice is process driven; I employ manual labour, and rigorous physical activity, in making my work and I let the aesthetic of the work be determined by the impact of this labour on my body. I use hard-to-erase industrial sandpapers and sheets of microbrasives both as art materials and working tools. I attempt to erase the surface of the microabrasive using a piece of sandpaper, a sanding cord or my bare fingers. My criterion to determine the end of a particular period in the process is the point at which I experience the utmost fatigue, or actual physical pain in my hand, palm or arm. The works I produce this way are the imprints of my labouring body, where every movement in the process or the choice of a specific tool - sandpaper or sanding cord – is determined in response to the fatigue or pain I felt when working. Thus, the aesthetic of the work emerges not from visual picture making decisions but from the limitations of my body.

I value manual labour (as autonomous activity), working with my hands (whether it is a skilled or unskilled process) and I believe there is dignity in physical work. In my childhood, we had no such luxuries as a fridge, electric stove, gas or central heating, or even hot water. Everyone in my family including my brother and I had to work around the home, often doing very hard labour, from an early age, for the sake of the family. Our parents worked during the day and we saw them working hard at home too. The sheer maintenance of daily life, providing a clean home, warm meals, and clean clothes, required significant effort, labour, and tedium.

As an artist, I intentionally choose processes and materials that are hard to work with. Nonetheless, I somewhat unintentionally discovered sandpaper as a material that requires hard labour to manipulate, when I arrived to London for my MFA studies in 2012 and (out of economic necessity), I made all my furniture for my home from wood. Using hand tools and raw physical labour involving hours and hours of hand sanding, I made my furniture not just to be functional but to look good. For me, the hand made and the well made go together.
In light of the foregoing, during my thesis show, I will work in the gallery and make work: hand-sewn pamphlets of a text titled *Paragraphs on Labour Art*, which is my intention-based personal manifesto for my work. I am committed to bringing my mastery of skills in bookbinding and printmaking to this work, in addition to foregrounding ideas about ‘labour art’.

My art is not about labour; it comes from the impetus to work rigorously and my desire to do manual labour but my work is not *about* labour. The artwork need not itself be sweating, the artist does. I am concerned with the process not the outcome. In this sense for me the means and the ends are the same. What comes out of my labour can be many things; what my labour produces is an open ended possibility.

In order to avoid closing down my work and narrowing it to a simple interpretation, I was prompted to write *Paragraphs on Labour Art*. More than fifty percent of this text is borrowed from Sol LeWitt's seminal writing, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, which is his intention-based definition for the kind of art he was doing at the time in 1967 and not a programmatic manifesto for every artist to follow. I found Sol LeWitt's approach appealing: to speak of intentions instead of outcomes and do it modestly, referring only to his own art.

The text, *Paragraphs on Labour Art*, also offers me an opportunity to bring a performative element to my work. I will read it in an artist’s talk during the opening reception for my show, where I will be standing in front of my ‘studio wall’ that I will move from my studio into the gallery --with many of my tools and materials presented on the wall. My studio wall, with the tools and materials on it, has been a constant subject of discussion regarding my art practice in the last two years. In fact, every visiting artist who entered my studio stood in front of it and declared it as my art. Until recently, I resisted considering my studio wall and my tools as part of my art practice, as an artwork, but it makes perfect sense to bring it to the gallery both as a backdrop for my artist talk and as a practical element for the days when I will work in the gallery on the pamphlets.
In addition, though perhaps not secondarily, it also demonstrates an important aspect of the values I attach to labour.

I have often heard that it appears the tools on my wall are not used as they are so clean. But in fact I have used all of my tools, and caring for the tools (cleaning, sharpening, and other maintenance) is very important to me. These are the tools with which I make my art, and if I care for my tools they will function well and serve me for a long time. As a child I was expected to take care for my things and I saw my parents doing the same. My father, who had many professions, from career soldier to opera choir singer to studio photographer – before settling down as a mechanic – worked in a factory making custom tools. I recall my mother’s anxiety when one day there was a gas explosion in the factory and my father did not make it to the emergency shelter. His colleagues went back to the building only to find him cleaning and packing away his work tools! They took him to safety just minutes before the fire consumed that building. I would not go to such foolish lengths for caring for my tools in extraordinary circumstances, but during my regular days in the studio, even if I work late into the night and well into the morning, I always clean and properly store my tools, sweep the floor, and leave my studio in pristine condition when I go home. I consider it as a form of respect for the work I do as an artist. In shared studios, like in a printmaking studio, where we share expensive equipments, toxic materials, and worktables, it is even more important to respect other artists’ work and their ability to use the studio.

Some of my recent works are video works showing my sanding of small sheets of diamond lapping film that I recorded by placing the camera under a glass table. The shadow of my hand is visible and occasionally so is the text on the back of the sandpaper, such as in the work Open, Warning, Body. Using rear projection, I project the video onto the lapping film, which is already sanded, thus collapsing two timeframes into one. The work is remade again and again through tracing with light the scratched lines on the lapping film.
My art practice is rigorous physical labour that I perform according to my own values; the process is what is important for me. The means is the end. It gives my work its integrity. The labour makes the art. As labour engages materials, it produces something, be it an object, text, performance, or video. But, as I have said, my work is not about labour, or for that matter it is not ‘about’ anything; it is not descriptive, didactic or illustrative. I think an artwork should offer a multiplicity of experiences if the artist wants to avoid mere illustration. I also believe in the equality of experiences. Art is a meeting point of two personal experiences, the artist’s personal experience that made the art, and the viewer’s personal experience that enters into a dialogue with it. My concept regarding equality I think is very close to that of Rancière.

I think that my work is in dialogue with Arendt’s theory of action as well. Though she thought of labour as being on the lowest level in the hierarchy of actions, because it is a necessity, (life maintenance performed in perpetuity), I see it as very valuable and important; it is thus, also, dignified work. By focusing my practice on labour, I believe I express my values and thinking regarding art and labour, at the same time.

The maintenance activities dedicated to my tools, when I am working in the gallery during my thesis show, will also be visible for viewers as I will perform them during gallery hours, just before closing. I will leave my workspace in the gallery in pristine condition at the end of every day just as I do in my studio. As labour is my art, the ‘doing’ itself, I need the tools for the doing, so the maintenance of my tools is also the maintenance of the art.


Krauss, Rosalind. “Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post 60s Sculpture.” *Artforum* 12, no. 3 (November 1973): 43-44.


Appendix A: Paragraphs on Labour Art
Gabriella Solti

Paragraphs on Labour Art

I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as labour art. In labour art the physical labour itself is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses some form of labour art, it means that all of the decisions are made during the execution and are exclusively based on the body’s response to fatigue, pain or injury and the end result is a perfunctory affair. The labour itself becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is visceral, it is involved with all types of physical labour the body can do and it is purposeless. It can be either free or not free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with labour art to make her work interesting or engaging to the spectator, but this objective is achieved not through conceptual acrobatics or visual spectacles arising from conscious and preconceived image making decisions but from the artist’s visceral and immediate response to the limitations of her body manifesting in muscle fatigue, pain or sometimes injury. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the labour artist is out to underwhelm the viewer. It is only the expectation of a preconceived meaning or a predetermined aesthetics, to which one conditioned to contemporary art is accustomed, that would deter the viewer from perceiving this art.

Labour art is necessarily laborious. Some forms of labour art are extremely laborious in execution but do not seem so perceptually. The artwork need not be sweating, the artist does. Labour art is executed through vigorous physical labour. Vigorous physical labour has impact on the physical world; it is often involve tools and materials during its execution. Thus the artwork often takes shape in physical form. What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must be executed through physical labour. It is the process of execution with which the artist is concerned. Once given physical reality by the artist the work is open to the perception of all, including the artist. (I use the word perception to mean the apprehension of the sense data and the labour involved, and simultaneously a subjective interpretation of both). The work of art can be perceived either during the execution if it is visible to the viewer or after it is completed.

Labour art is purposeless but this does not imply that it has no value or lacks virtue. The labour artist chooses the form of labour and performs the labour based upon the intrinsic value she associates with labour. This intrinsic value differs from artist to artist and does not necessarily conform with that of the viewer’s either. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the labour artist is out to offend the viewer. The labour artist simply has no choice just to act upon her own values if she is to preserve the integrity of her work.
Since the function of execution and perception are contradictory (one through-, the other postfact) the artist would mitigate this contradiction by strictly adhering to the rule of making every decision during execution always responding to the physical state of her body as affected by the labour performed. Artist can respond to the same physical state of the body in different ways; no two bodies or the subjective threshold of tolerance of pain are the same. Labour art is not meant to be performed based on objective criteria. Labour art expresses the subjectivity of both the artist’s body and her values. If the artist wishes to rigorously adhere to her intent of doing labour art, then chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while planning would be eliminated from the making of the art. The work does not necessarily have to be rejected if it does not look good. Sometimes what is initially thought to be awkward or dull labour will eventually be visually pleasing.

To give away with a plan is one way of avoiding objectivity and give way to immediate attention and response to the labouring body. It also eliminates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The labour would design the work. Some form of physical labour lends itself to millions of variations, and some are limited in scope. In each case, however, the artist would select the form of labour according to her values and her assessment of what her body can do. Ideally the physical labour involved should not be complex. The less complexity involved in the execution, the better. This eliminates the preplanned, the theoretical, and the objective as much as possible. Using a simple form of labour repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity of the labour. This intensity of labour becomes the end while the form becomes the means.

It doesn't really matter if the viewer understands or appreciates the kind of labour that went into the work by seeing the art. Once it is out of her hand the artist has no control over the way a viewer will perceive the work. Different people will understand the same thing in a different way.

Determining what size a piece should be is difficult. Intensive physical labour can be concentrated on a small surface. This intensity can be also spread across large areas. For some artist labour can be best expressed in quantity of repeated acts. Reductive processes can demand just as much of vigorous physical labour as additive processes but they are not necessarily evident or prominently visible in the artwork. However this should not deter the labour artist to choose reductive processes as the labour itself should be her concern as opposed to what this labour marginally produces. The artist is free to use but not obligated to employ strategies of mediation - such as titles, written document, performance or artist talk - to refer explicitly to the labour involved.

New materials are one of the great afflictions of contemporary art. Some artists feel necessary to work with new materials to satisfy the artworld’s need of perennial novelty. There is nothing worse than seeing art that wallows in gaudy baubles. In labour art new materials have a place if they demand vigorous
physical labour while working with them. When choosing the form of labour and the necessary materials and tools it requires, the labour artist asks the question: Is it difficult? If it is not difficult, it is not worth doing.

These paragraphs are not intended as categorical imperatives, but the ideas stated are as close as possible to my thinking at this time. These ideas are the result of my work as an artist and are subject to change as my experience changes. I have tried to state them with as much clarity as possible. If the statements I make are unclear it may mean the thinking is unclear. Even while writing these ideas there seemed to be obvious inconsistencies (which I have tried to correct, but others will probably slip by). I do not advocate some form of labour art for all artists. I have found that it has worked well for me while other ways have not. It is one way of making art; other ways suit other artists. Nor do I think all labour art merits the viewer's attention. Some labour art just isn't laborious enough.
Appendix B: Photo Documentation of Art Practice

All artworks are by Gabriella Solti. Photo credit: Gabriella Solti

Work #87: *left wrist and upper arm hurt*, 2013
hand-sanded 5 micron silicon carbide microfinising film, mounted on foamboard frame, 8.5” x 11”

Work #64: *Blister on my left thumb*, 2013
hand-sanded 5 micron silicon carbide microfinising film, mounted on foamboard frame, 8.5” x 11”
Work #126, 2013
hand-sanded 0.5 micron chromium oxide microfinishing film, mounted on foamboard frame, 8.5” x 11”

Work #117, 2013
panel in window installation, hand-sanded 0.5 micron chromium oxide microfinishing film lit from the back by daylight, 8.5” x 11”
Installation view in exhibition *split film filament*, Artlab Gallery, 2013
window installation is made of panels of hand sanded silicon carbide and chromium oxide microabrasives, 7’ x 10’ total size
The Book of Hours, 2013
Unique book, 100 pages total, unpaginated, 70 pages hand-sanded silicon carbide and chromium oxide microfinishing film, 30 pages hand-coloured frosted mylar, hand bound, 7” x 11.5” when closed
Illuminations, 2014
hand-sanded diamond lapping films in various colours and grits, 3” x 6” each, rear video projection loop

Open, Warning, Body, 2014
video, 4 min., loop
Appendix C: Copyright Release

Copyright Act, Section 29: Fair Dealings

The present thesis is a non-profit publication, thus I have included reproductions of artworks and photographs without obtaining prior copyright clearance for each image. In Canada, this is not considered an infringement of copyright for a commercial publication, due to the “fair dealings” provision in Section 29 of the Copyright Act. It reads as follows:

Fair Dealing

Research or private study
29.1 Fair dealing for the purpose of research or private study does not infringe copyright. R. R., 1985, c. C-42, s. R. S., 1985, c. 10 (4th Sup.), s. 7; c. 47, s. 61; 1997, c. 24, s. 18

Criticism or review

29.1 Fair Dealing for the purposes of criticism or review does not infringe copyright if the following are mentioned:
(a) the source; and
(b) if given in the source, the name of the
   i. author, in the case of a work
   ii. performer, in the case of a performance
   iii. maker, in the case of a sound recording, or
   iv. broadcaster, in the case of a communication signal

1997, c. 24, s. 18.

The full act can be found online at:
CURRICULUM VITAE

Gabriella Solti

EDUCATION

2014 May Master of Fine Arts, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2014 Feb Western Certificate in University Teaching and Learning, University of Western Ontario, London, ON
2011 Apr Bachelor of Fine Arts, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC
1984 May Master of Computer Science, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORMANCES

2014 May Sisyphus is Happy, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
2014 March Cross Sections, MLC Gallery, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON
2013 Oct Split film filament, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
2013 Aug 22 Mr. Palomar - Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino, performative reading, Rolston Recital Hall, The Banff Centre, Banff, AB
2011 Oct Wayzgoose (Fine Press Books), Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, BC
2011 Oct Fine Press/Artist’s Books, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, Minneapolis, USA
2011 Mar Schönste Bücher aus aller Welt (The Most Beautiful Books From All Over The World), International Exhibit, Leipzig Book Fair, Leipzig, Germany
2011 Feb Best Book Designs in Canada, FAB Gallery, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta
2010 Nov Artist’s Books / Best Book Designs in Canada, Port Moody Arts Centre, Port Moody, BC
2010 Oct Book Art International, Frankfurt Book Fair, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
2010 Sept Concordia BOX Carr, Print Exchange 2010, Vancouver, Montreal
2010 July On Collections, (artist’s books from the Josef Vosk Collection and contemporary Canadian artists), Concourse Gallery, Vancouver, BC (Curated by Celia King)
2010 July The Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, Simon Fraser University W.A.C. Bennett Library, Vancouver, BC
2010 July The Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, Canadian Embassy (E.H. Norman Library), Tokyo, Japan (in conjunction with the Tokyo International Book Fair)
2009 Oct Wayzgoose (Fine Press Books), Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, BC
2008 July Book Art, (artist books from contemporary Canadian artists), Concourse Gallery, Vancouver, BC (Curated by Celia King)
2006 Dec Untitled (Pink Installation), collaborative project, Media Gallery, Vancouver, BC
2006 June  Book-Art, Festival Itinerario di Cesena, Cesena, Italy
2006 Apr  Book-Art International, Arteatica, Rome, Italy (sponsored by UNESCO under the patronage of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome)

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

McIntosh Gallery, London, ON, Canada
Deutsches Buch- und Schriftmuseum (German Book and Writing Museum / National Library of Germany), Leipzig, Germany
Simon Fraser University W.A. C. Bennett Library Special Collections and Rare Books, Vancouver, BC, Canada
University of Alberta Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, Edmonton, AB, Canada
Vancouver Public Library Special Collections, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Toronto Public Library Special Collections, Toronto, Canada
Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada
Arteatica, Rome, Italy

ARTISTIC AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

2013  Always lift inking rollers when press is not in operation … Thematic Residency, with Will Holder, David Reinfurt, Alex Waterman, Richard Birkett, The Banff Centre, Banff, AB
2013  Canada Council for the Arts Travel Grant
2012  John Koerner Award in the Fine and Performing Arts in British Columbia
2010  Alcuin Society Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, Third Prize in the Limited Edition Category for The Sensory Delights of Text

SCHOLARSHIPS

2014  Academic Achievement Scholarship, Public Service Alliance of Canada Local 610, Western University
2014  Visual Arts Department Travel Grant, University of Western Ontario
2013  Banff Centre Scholarship (to attend thematic residency)
2013  SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, Master’s
2013  Ontario Graduate Scholarship (declined)
2013  Graduate Research Scholarship, University of Western Ontario (declined)
2013  Visual Arts Department Travel Grant, University of Western Ontario
2013  Society of Graduate Students Travel Grant, University of Western Ontario
2012  Graduate Research Scholarship, University of Western Ontario
2012  Chair’s Entrance Scholarship, University of Western Ontario
2008  Mary Catherine Gordon Memorial Scholarship, Emily Carr University
2007  Kay Jenkins Memorial Scholarship, Emily Carr University
BIBLIOGRAPHY / CATALOGUES / ARTIST TALKS


Intersections 2014: Thinking|Feeling, York/Ryerson Communication and Culture Joint Graduate Programme Conference, March 15, 2014 (artist panel)

PRE-scribing/DE-scribing: Language as Documentary Form, Ed. Richard Birkett (of Artist’s Space: Books and Talks, New York), 2014 (upcoming joint Banff Centre/Artists Space publication)

From Vienna to Vancouver: A family story at the intersection of current experience, personal memory, and world historical events, (Re)activating Objects: Social Theory and Material Culture, Graduate Student Conference, University of Western Ontario, March 2, 2013, (performative artist talk)

Sound Resistance, Vancouver Community Radio, March 30, 2012 (interview)


Artist’s Books by Gabriella Solti, Port Moody Arts Centre, Nov 4, 2010 (artist talk)

Poems, Woo Magazine, Issue #3, March 2009

“An Evening with ESOPUS” at The Kitchen, New York, November 14, 2007 (reading)

Dreams, Ed. Mike Powell, ESOPUS 9, Fall 2007

CURATION

Madness+Mobility: The Art of Inclusion, Gallery Gachet, Vancouver, BC, 2012
(supported by BC Arts Council Innovation Grant; showcase project for BC Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts)


Close Reading: Artists’ Books and Publications from Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Port Moody Arts Centre, Port Moody, BC, 2010 (co-curated with guest artist Beth Howe)

Thinking about Green, Port Moody Arts Centre, Port Moody, BC, 2010