work | space (the laborer revealed)

Nicole Farrand

Virginia Commonwealth University

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work | space (the laborer revealed)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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ABSTRACT

work | space (the laborer revealed)

By Nicole M. Farrand, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Director: Heath Matysek-Snyder
Assistant Professor, Department of Craft/Material Studies, School of the Arts

There is always a moment, within the act of work, when the decision comes into question; the mind is aware of the goal, seeking out the destination, but the body brings the reality of the task to light, at first whispering its doubts, then speaking in full volume. The physical intensity of the creation of my work enlivens this debate between the consciousness of my intellect and the limitations of my being.

The act of defining myself as an artist serves as a challenge to my body’s capabilities as a maker. Through this relationship with my work, I have become deeply intimate with the term labor. My thesis aims to contextualize my engagement with labor within the universal understanding that human beings possess an inherent need to work. While the interchangeable use of terms such as work and labor is highly disputed, I have found that my role as artist, actions as maker, and identity as worker persuade me to define my work as labor and my labors as work. This subsequent body of work serves as a record of the actions of the laborer. A floor sits; frozen in the process of installation, it awaits the return of the laborer to complete the work. Through the cyclical conversation between the workers’ voices embroidered upon the wall and the work being performed on the floor, the installation serves as the preserved space of the anonymous laborer.
INTRODUCTION

Unless there is discomfort, it is not enough. Unless the body is physically taxed and the muscles moan with their tales of tedious, repetitious motions, it’s not enough. Unless the mind is doubting and questioning and equally blank, it’s not enough. Unless the monotony and doubt can be twisted and manipulated into some equality with pleasure, pride and accomplishment, I cannot seem to convince myself that it is enough. The act of defining myself as an artist serves as a challenge to my body’s capabilities as a maker. The physicality of the creation of a work of art asks that the body be fully attentive; the notion of concept comes to be realized through the action of limbs. Through this tangible relationship with my work, I have become deeply intimate with the term labor. I have been continuously confronted by my own need to define and access its essence, as well as its most defiant suggestions. While the interchangeable use of terms such as work and labor is highly disputed, I find that my role as artist, actions as maker, and identity as worker persuade me to define my work as labor and my labors as work. Through the creation of my work, I choose to revel in process for my own spiritual satisfaction, thereby rendering myself a worker in service to the creation of a sculpted image. I take pride in my labor and view work as both a measure of my success and a source of personal fulfillment.

I often wonder how I came to develop such a romantic notion of the role of labor within my perspective on art. The value of hard work, be it physical or mental, was certainly instilled in me from an early age. Yet, my perspective on my art-making practice evolved from a variety of separate experiences. I can, for instance, recall a particular day when I first acknowledged the relationship of the term monumental to works of art. This experience was not due to the subject matter of what was on view, but was a response solely to scale, multiplicity, and the repetitive labor of human activity. Rounding the corner in an unfamiliar gallery, I found myself in the familiar space of a neutral white room, one which seemed at first to have just the slightest touch
of an off-white tone along one long wall. Approaching the wall, the image as I had initially perceived it began to shift. Revealing depth and texture, a convincing landscape of topography lined the entire surface of a forty-plus foot wall. As I continued to move closer, scrutinizing the surface, I realized that this “image” was not that at all. It was, in fact, made up of a twelve foot tall stack of clear drinking straws protruding on end from the surface of the wall. I soon discovered that the space I had stumbled upon in this small museum was the first room in a large solo exhibition of Tara Donovan’s work.

Experiencing this work in person, having never heard her name or seen her work before, was unlike any artistic encounter I had ever had. As I walked through this first space, I overheard one of the guards speaking with a patron. She was explaining the challenges that resulted from installing this particular work of straws in a city museum. As the artist and installation crew were working on another piece in a separate room just a few days before the opening, they were suddenly shaken by a thunderous vibration of sound. Upon entering the room where the straw work had been installed, they found the monstrous piece had collapsed; thousands of straws were strewn about the floor. With the activity of city life and the presence of construction on many buildings surrounding the museum, it seemed that the building had been shaken hard enough to send vibrations through the piece. The subsequent hours were spent gathering people – friends, friends of friends, staff, and anyone with hands to work – to reassemble the piece over the next couple of days. My admiration and interest was piqued not by Donovan’s simplistic and impressive use of material, but by the sheer scale of what was being made. I imagined the work undertaken by the many hands building and
constructing such vast and intricate forms. I walked away from the show that day exhilarated by the idea of working with one’s hands – not so focused on the monumentality of the works themselves, but on the impressive amount of human labor required to fabricate and install them.
As I have begun to acknowledge my artistic role as a maker and identify my practice as labor, I have found it necessary to contextualize my process within the historical evolution of the term. My own interest in working with my hands led me to an investigation of the Arts and Crafts Movement and to the writings of William Morris. As a response to the Industrial Revolution and the mechanization of labor, the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement championed the skilled labor of the worker as a break from the stark division of labor developing within industry. Supporting his objectives with theories of philosophers such as the socialist Karl Marx, Morris feared that this division of labor was causing workers to become specialists in a singular skill and was preventing them from becoming well-rounded craftsmen with an interest in their work. His argument in favor of the human propensity to labor explained, “even though work was an inescapable fact of life…it also satisfied a hedonistic impulse. Just as ‘the dog take pleasure in hunting, and the horse in running, and the bird in flying,’ so the ‘natural and rightful’ motive for labor in mankind was the ‘desire for pleasure.’”

The decline in individuals finding pleasure through work as a result of mechanization has also become a concern for much research beyond the Arts and Crafts Movement. In his essay on the development of the assembly line in the meat-packing industry, author Darryn Snell refers to the evolution of division of labor in industry as a process of “deskilling.” Supporting his use of the term with the writings of James Barrett, he explains, “By the 1880s, deskilling benefited the packers by reducing labour to a common unskilled and ‘semi-skilled operative denominator, and control over the labour process became concentrated among employers and their foremen, who used direct supervision or machine pacing to ‘drive’ their workers.”

As a maker, I was fascinated by this concept of labor as a process of eliminating skill. My labor

becomes heavily reliant upon the evolution of my skills to craft the work I set out to make. This notion of “deskilling,” of essentially removing the human element from the worker, caused me to reconsider my decision to identify myself with the term laborer.

As I have come to familiarize myself with this notion of “deskilling,” I’ve begun to consider how or if these specialized workers could find reward through their work in such a limiting environment. I found that I could identify with the concerns laid out by Alain de Botton in *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*. On the subject of factory work he writes, “The real issue is not whether baking biscuits is meaningful, but the extent to which the activity can seem to be so after it has been continuously stretched and subdivided across five thousand lives and half a dozen different manufacturing sites.” With exposure to these ideas, I became focused on the identity of the worker, and my role in portraying this individual through the act of constructing my work. In contemporary society, we have become accustomed to the idea that objects are mass-produced in an industrial environment; the image of the singular worker is no longer present. Consequently, I wondered how the products of my labor could make visible the identity of the worker and honor the role of that individual.

My discovery of the Studs Terkel book *Working* has profoundly impacted the approach I have taken to creating my work over the course of the past year. Written through the transcription of interviews with workers, the book contains hundreds of pages of dialogue between the author and people from all walks of life, discussing “what they do all day.” Through these accounts, Terkel showcases the humanity behind work – honoring the individuals performing these supposedly unskilled tasks. As I read through these interviews, the story of Grace Clements was particularly resonant for me. Her job title was defined as “Felter,” working at a “deskilled” job in a luggage factory. Reading her account, I found myself wondering about my own physical abilities, my strength to perform these tasks described, and whether I had the mental faculty

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to persist in such tasks everyday for years or decades. Ms. Clements describes her process as follows:

In forty seconds you have to take the wet felt out of the felter, put the blanket on – a rubber sheeting – to draw out the excess moisture, wait two, three seconds, take the blanket off, pick the wet felt up, balance it on your shoulder – there is no way of holding it without it tearing all to pieces, it is wet and will collapse – reach over, get the hose, spray the inside of this copper screen to keep it from plugging, turn around, walk to the hot dry die behind you, take the hot piece off with your opposite hand, set it on the floor – this wet thing is still balanced on my shoulder – put the wet piece on the dry die, push this button that let the dry press down, inspect the piece we just took off, the hot piece, stack it and count it – when you get a stack of ten, you push it over and start another stack of ten…and start all over.4

Visualizing these words, I question the notion of skill, and consider my own abilities. The strict parameters of time, process, and rules to be followed in the course of each day of Clements’ life in the factory required her to be constantly alert and acutely aware of what tasks she was performing at all times. I found myself trying to understand this notion of the “deskilled” worker, and wondering if these workers truly lacked skill. It seemed that, in developing my own work, I should attempt to define, or redefine, how it is that I perceive the concept of skill.

When addressing this notion of skill, it is necessary to first consider not only the social perspectives of labor addressed above, but also the philosophical perspective and the value of its influence upon my practices. I have an interest in developing a deeper understanding of how it is that we find pleasure and meaning through the performance of labor. Responding to the perceived decline in individual satisfaction as a result of the mechanization of our working practices, author Matthew Fox champions a “reinvention” of work. He explains:

Prior to the industrial revolution, work was more relational. To be successful as a farmer one had to relate well to one’s farm animals; humans and animals were interdependent. One could not survive on subject-object relationships…. The lesson from the industrial revolution is this: work is not primarily about factories and industries. The human species has always worked…. For the sake of the future, we must…redirect our economy toward sound and life-sustaining enterprises…. What might this new work be? I am convinced that it is work on the human being itself. We might call this ‘inner work.’5

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This “inner work,” in which the individual establishes an emotional, personal relationship with the work being performed, and a meaningful level of satisfaction in its results, is at the very heart of my artistic practice.

The pursuit to discover the roots of our inclination toward labor has allowed me to uncover explanations within religion, philosophy, and personal anecdote. I have explored religious writings such as the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu text, and the Tao te Ching, the canonical book of Taoism. I have examined the writings of theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, and of the mystic Meister Eckhart. Through the study of a variety of philosophical perspectives, my romantic notions of the inherent need to labor were confirmed. I have long kept the words of Kahlil Gibran’s The Prophet close to the forefront of my thoughts. When speaking to the people about work, the prophet stated:

> Always you have been told that work is a curse and labour a misfortune.  
> But I say to you that when you work you fulfill a part of earth’s furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born,  
> And in keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life,  
> And to love life through labour is to be intimate with life’s inmost secret.  
> ...
> Work is love made visible.  
> And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.  
> For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man’s hunger.\(^6\)

The philosophy of Gibran’s prophet was one of my initial reaffirmations of the internal desire to find pleasure through my work. Thomas Aquinas speaks further of this relationship between love, passion, and work saying, “If we are not being served truth and justice as regular fare at work, then no matter how well we are fed materially, we will starve spiritually. Our work must make way for the heart…. Without that heart-food, we will surely die of starvation of the spirit.”\(^7\)

\(^7\) Fox, Reinvention of Work, 26.
With these words in mind, I began to view my labor as an act of feeding the spirit. I chose to acknowledge the heart, and the presence of the soul in work.

There is a sense of accomplishment, a very specific type of satisfaction, that comes only through the act of working. This precise sensation, dubbed “enchantment” by Meister Eckhart, allows us to determine our own personal measure for what exactly is good, worthwhile work.\(^8\)

I further break down work into notions of “good” and “bad,” not out of some system of values based upon standard social practices, but upon what could be most beneficial for myself as a maker. In this examination, I found comfort in the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It advises:

> Know therefore what is work, and also know what is wrong work. And know also of a work that is silence: mysterious is the path of work. The person who in his or her work finds silence, and who sees that silence is work, this person in truth sees the Light and in all his or her works find peace.\(^9\)

Through such sentiments, I have found a path for my work as I continue forward. I am continuously challenged to create an image of labor that is deeper than the easily observed measuring of quantity and toil, one that might speak more quietly of the laborer.

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\(^8\) Fox, *Reinvention of Work*, 136.

\(^9\) Ibid., 26.
PORTRAYING LABOR

Having formed a foundation to contextualize the notion of labor, there are a few primary strategies I apply to embrace the topic within my own work. Specifically: observation of time, skill in quality of craftsmanship, and emphasis on work made only by my own hands. I admit to a bit of a love affair with the fundamental goals set out by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. In my current practice, I have chosen to emphasize as much handwork as I am physically capable of completing. I choose to twist and form ropes from my own rope machine as opposed to purchasing spools of the product already twisted and ready for dyeing. I choose to cut flooring from stock lumber into individual beveled-edged boards rather than purchase prefab machined flooring that will fit together effortlessly and without issue. I make these decisions not to challenge my physical strength and stamina, but to acknowledge the ability of the hand to bring into being that which is usually machine manufactured and so often overlooked.

The issue of skill – specifically my own proficiency as a maker – has been cause for much discussion in the last couple of years. In my identity as a maker, I embrace some of the earliest notions of Marxist theory on craftsmanship. Described in his early years as one who sought to “realize the dignity of labor,” Marx placed an emphasis on the idea that “self and social relations developed through making physical things, enabling the ‘all-round development of the individual.’”

Through the development of my physical abilities and increased knowledge of materials, I have come to a deeper understanding of my own desires and limitations. I choose not to purchase fabricated multiples because it feels essential that I make the effort to personally fabricate my work in order to realize the pride that I seek through my labor. Just as Christopher Frayling ultimately identifies skill as “retaining control at the point of production,” I seek to direct and maintain all aspects of quality in the output of my work.

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appearance of work made by my hands has a high level of finish that often seems to contradict my intentions in identifying my work as handcrafted. The pursuit of this quality of finish is truly not a conscious decision, but has become an instinctual activity inseparable from the evolution of my personal aesthetic. While it has been discussed as to whether this ultimately detracts from my intentions, or whether the viewer’s perception of my labor is altered by it, I am unconvinced that the high level of craftsmanship is counter to an image of work. While I myself choose to embrace skill in the process of making, the appreciation of such for the viewer is merely tangential.

The importance of time in my work is an aspect of my practice that I most often question. I am continuously considering the relationship of time to my engagement with the idea of labor. One can assume that the inherent nature of constructing multiples by hand requires the investment of long stretches of time spent in repetitive processes. It is these processes that I grasp on to for comfort, but through this practice I have also begun to consider the rate at which time seems to change pace in the midst of labored activity. Having listened to a recent interview with Ann Hamilton, I found myself captivated by the way in which she described her desire to use her work as a translation of this ambiguous realm of time within an art-making practice. She explains her working time as follows:

I think that when you’re immersed in making, the time can be lusciously slow. And in that, the process of making cultivates attention. You know, you become aware of maybe how you breathe, or how the subtle shift of how you hold your hand in a tool or a material has all the consequence of how the mark is made or how it leaves a trace. That kind of attention is, for me, very generative. It’s broadly associative. It allows you to kind of be doing and thinking in concert.12

This act of doing, of filling time with action, does provide me a sense of comfort, and a stillness of mind amidst the accomplishment of work. There is a real physical tension caused by this need to spend time, fill time, and also regain lost time. The release of such tension, it seems, may be satisfied only by the labor of intensive making.

ARTIST AS LABORER

I view my time in graduate school as a process of learning to let go of my preconceived notions of work. Time spent making and considering my practice allowed me to evolve and come to terms with accepting my fate as laborer. With a strong understanding of the emotional satisfaction acquired through process, these last two years have given me the opportunity to recognize the value of work, the historical evolution of labor, and our deeply inherent impulse to create. From work created in my first semester, I brought with me prior knowledge of the notion of *flow* examined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Described as a state of mind attained through action, he explains, “It’s this focus…[in which] sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, you feel part of something larger. And once those conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake.”

My earliest work at this time was centered around the notion of finding meditation through process. Without much consideration for the true value of labor and the specific action being performed, I sought to attain this *flow* state through the continuous and obsessive fabrication of singular objects. Through the experience of constructing *In Flow*, a work comprised of 400 spheres hand-woven from strips of veneer, and *In the Full Functioning of Body and Mind*, a composition of 120 hand-tied nets draped in a horizon line across the wall, I chose to focus on being present – being *in* the action of work. These works allowed me to investigate the act of constructing an image from multiple parts. I was essentially creating paintings on the wall through the use of dimensional form and subtle shifts of color. While these works

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held great value for me in their ability to challenge my perceptions of scale and my relationship to sculptural work on the surface of the wall, I found that the conceptual basis for much of the work was still lacking. In order to further develop a context, I felt it necessary to honestly scrutinize my process. I soon realized what exactly I had been doing in constructing these works - essentially, crafting marks to be utilized in drawings.

It was with this notion of the crafting of marks that I chose to enter my first year review. Over the course of the second semester, as I poured through images of natural growth processes, I took comfort in the fact that the visualization of growth could be recognized through the formal presence of pattern, texture, and line. I began to make marks in the simplest manner, choosing to break from the process of constructing forms to which I had grown accustomed, and literally layering marks through drawing. Still interested in the bodily presence of scale that I had discovered through working with the large constructed “paintings” from earlier, I sought to create an environment with a drawing alone. Multiplying and manipulating my hand-drawn imagery through the aid of technology, I printed these drawn marks onto multiple sheer panels of fabric that served as the barriers of my environment. The space created and the marks made would serve to capture both my own fascination with the presence of the mark in our environment, as well as the gesture of my hand in the act of drawing.

In the end, what I felt had been abandoned in the creation of this piece was the presence of myself as the worker. Continuing to draw from the observed lines in natural growth, it seemed essential for me to reinsert the worker’s presence through the act of physically constructing each mark in a dimensional image. I chose to build a rope machine, and began twisting threads into handmade ropes as a means of investigating the burden of making each line in a drawing physically tangible. I began here to
really recognize my concern with labor through utilization of a less than efficient means for a more personalized outcome.

The acknowledgment of myself as laborer, as worker in service to the creation of my art, came through considering this body of work. As I began to shift my thoughts toward the artist as laborer, I came across an interview with Janine Antoni. First captivated by Antoni’s work *Moor*, a huge rope constructed through the actions of many hands twisting collected material into large spiral strands, I had long been interested in the presence of her pieces without fully understanding why I found them so riveting. As I read, I found deep resonance in her response to the lack of autobiographical content in her work. She claims, “When you are with my objects you are with something I have, literally, been intimate with. The work doesn’t necessarily reveal anything personal. You come to understand the work through your own body.”

This discovery of the body’s presence in a work of art was crucial to my own process of striving to insert myself into the work through the image of the laborer.

It was at this time that I also discovered *Working*, the Studs Terkel book mentioned previously. These stories were cause for a powerful shift in my thinking. What had been missing from my approach, and was realized through reading first-hand accounts of people discussing their daily work, was a true consideration of the human experience in the act of labor. Terkel describes our need to work as a search. He claims, “It is about a search...for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as

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cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.\textsuperscript{15} In order for me to understand the need that I felt to labor for my work, it seemed that I must come to understand Terkel’s notion of the “search” and insert myself into the tedium of the actions being recounted in these interviews.

Many of the accounts I found most captivating were told by factory workers as they discussed the monotony of their daily activities. I wondered about coping in these environments, and how human beings are able to repetitively perform these tasks over days, months, and even decades. Phil Stallings, a spot-welder in a Ford assembly plant, explains, “Repetition is such that if you were to think about the job itself, you’d slowly go out of your mind. You’d let your problems build up, you’d get to a point where you’d be at the fellow next to you…. You just strike out at anything you can. So if you involve yourself by yourself, you overcome this.”\textsuperscript{16} Daydreaming, occupying the mind with memories, with future plans, removing the mind from the action seems to be a means of surviving the monotonous nature of the work.

The nature of personality and gender also have a strong presence in the character of the worker and their tolerances. In another portion of Grace Clements’ interview, she discusses her opinion that despite the physicality of her work, it ultimately requires the strength of a woman to be performed. She reveals:

They can’t keep the men on the tanks. We’ve never been able to keep a man over a week. They say it’s too monotonous. I think women adjust to monotony better than men do. Because their minds are used to doing two things at once, where a man usually can do one thing at a time. A woman is used to listening to a child tell her something while she’s doing something else. She might be making a cake while the child is asking her a question. She can answer that child and continue to put that cake together. It’s the same way on the tanks. You get to be automatic in what you’re doing and your mind is doing something else.\textsuperscript{17}

I have not considered gender as a relevant aspect of my previous work, nor the work I am making currently. However, I found myself able to identify with Ms. Clements’ words in her

\textsuperscript{15} Terkel, \textit{Working}, xi.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 292.
ability to perform two actions simultaneously – outward work and inner processing of activity.

With the factory workers’ sentiments at the forefront of my thoughts, I embarked on a mission of sorts early in my second year. I assigned myself the task of essentially performing the role of a one-woman factory, constructing hundreds of small finger-jointed wooden boxes. My experience with this project was meant to be both a test of my mental faculties to perform the same daily tasks over several weeks, and of my physical ability to not only accept the pain and toll of such work on my body, but also to attempt to make by hand with same the precision as the factory. This last goal, I acknowledged from the outset, was an impossibility, which allowed me to accept the certainty of failure and consider its consequences and implications. In the construction of the final piece, entitled “They say it’s too monotonous.”, I stacked close to 300 boxes in vertical rows upon a small palette designed specifically to their scale. From a distance, the piece fits simply into the realm of the factory-produced object – assembled, stacked, and prepared for shipment to an ambiguous destination. Upon closer examination, however, there is clear evidence of the worker. The presence of the hand exists through the multitude of flaws and imperfections that I have noted and marked upon inspection.

In my role as factory worker, I began to consider how the human spirit could be inserted into the seeming inhumanity of mass manufacture. Seeking to determine whether such a situation has ever been present, I became fascinated by a documentary detailing the creation of Ai Weiwei’s Sunflower Seeds. Comprised of more than 100 million seeds, this piece appears at first to be merely an accumulation of the natural object, collected from the flowers themselves. It is in fact made from an impossible multitude of porcelain casts, each of which has been hand-painted.
by artisans in a very specific region of China where the porcelain itself was produced. As he describes the magnitude of this undertaking, Weiwei notes the fact that the piece is meant to both revive the place in which it was created, recognizing the loss of work in this region as a result of industry, as well as honor the value of the old tradition of painting on porcelain.

Through the creation of the piece, he is paying tribute to the skill of these trained workers. He is also questioning “ability” and inquiring as to whether or not the imagined scale – a seemingly impossible quantity – could be completely constructed through the work of human hands. “We’ve been working here for five or six years,” he explains, “just to find out the possibilities of employing this old technique to modern contemporary language.”

In our contemporary language of manufacture, it seems the hand no longer has a presence in the production of large quantities of objects.

Next, I chose to engage with the floor as the space of the worker. I was struck one afternoon amidst my admitted daydreaming during Anna von Mertens’ visiting artist lecture, by a singular statement she made regarding a shift in her own work. She claimed, “The wall is about the act of looking and the floor is the space of the everyday.” As someone who had lovingly clung to the wall as a canvas upon which to hang my work, I was honestly curious about what it would mean for me to embrace the floor not as a surface upon which to place my pedestal, but as a space with its own identity. Again finding resonance through the words of a worker in Studs Terkel’s book, I was captivated by the way in which carpenter Nick Lindsay described the kneeling of a worker as a form of worship for his activity. He says:

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19 Anna von Mertens, “Artist Talk” (lecture, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, November 12, 2012).
You work like you were kneeling down. You go into Riverside Church in New York and there’s no space between the pews to kneel. (Laughs.) If you try to kneel down in that church, you break your nose on the pew in front. A bunch of churches are like that. Who kneels down in that church? I’ll tell you who kneels. The man kneels who’s settin’ the toilets in the restrooms. He’s got to kneel, that’s part of his work. The man who nails the pews on the floor, he had to kneel down. The man who put the receptacles in the walls that turn that I-don’t-know-how-many horsepower organ they got in that Riverside Church…. Any work, you kneel down – it’s a kind of worship. It’s a part of the holiness of things, work, yes.20

With this in mind, I found myself acknowledging the floor as the space of the laborer, and the act of working on the floor, I would soon find, served as a physical reminder of the effects of repetitive labor upon the body.

At this point, too, as I began to think about how to establish time with my next piece – to illustrate the worker’s time really – I found a body of work by Helen Mirra entitled 65 Instants. Utilizing a completely systemized process, Mirra created one individual work every day over a sixty-five day period.

With her established parameters that acknowledged concepts of Buddhist philosophy, she constructed works from reclaimed wood, each sanded and painted to completion as a symbol of the day’s work. Through considerations of her process, I wondered if the restriction of time in the execution of a piece could serve to embody the laborer behind my work. Applying a new sense of the possibilities of the floor – the worker’s ownership of this space – and the establishment of a time structure, I created Pace. The piece was determined and fabricated from a precise set of guidelines that I then, as the worker, accepted as my rules for making. I chose to construct a section of oak flooring, milling it from stock lumber into individual boards, I then sanded each row and painted it according to a calendar date. Utilizing color as a device to indicate time, I worked with a system that assigns each date of the year with its own unique

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20 Terkel, Working, 517-18.
color. *Pace* itself exists as this moment of work, all 28 days of production, and leaves itself open to the possibility of completion through the opportunity to utilize all 365 days (colors) of the year.

With my most recent installation, *work | space (the laborer revealed)*, I ask the viewer to enter the space of the laborer, and to participate in some quiet way in the evaluation of labor that I have been working to dissect. For the embroidery pieces included in the installation, I have been executing two very different, although equally relevant, forms of work. The first form involved the gathering of very specific information, which was collected from a variety of sources including scholarly texts, anecdotes, and personal interviews. I have personally conducted these interviews with individuals working in a variety of different industries. Posing a very specific series of questions to each worker, it was my intention to gather their opinions on the nature of work and labor. The second form of work being performed involved the physical effort of consuming and documenting this information. As I have contemplated thoughts on this topic to which I have been obsessively devoted, my perceptions of labor constantly shifted. Using the process of embroidery, I chose to record personal opinions on work and labor that I have found to be particularly meaningful. I have also worked to document statements with which I take issue or that have caused me to question my conception of the terms. Through the act of embroidering the text, I am allowed time to process and reconsider these notions of labor. This work is an opportunity to record my own laborious practice as well as to create a tactile representation of these ideas.

Through formal decisions in the creation of this piece, I am also asking the viewer to participate in some form of work. Choosing the simplicity of linen as my surface, the material
itself has a rich history with the subject of labor. Created from the spinning of flax fibers, flax being “among the first [plants] used to produce textiles in human history,” linen was woven into fabric by both men and women alike, for all manner of use from clothing the body to use in ceremony to protection of surfaces.21 Despite using machine-manufactured fabric, I am drawn to linen for its rich history of production and its natural relationship to the body. As one writer romantically observes, “Linen sticks so close to human lives – from swaddling clothes to shroud, from table napkins to lingerie – that its interlocking fibers retain a hidden trace of every contact. Linen bears silent witness to the private side of life.”22 Using this material in a natural and undyed state, I feel it has an inherent simplicity and can reveal a relationship to the hand that holds it or the worker who might have woven it. Embroidering into the surface of this off-white fabric, I’ve used a similarly toned thread, which allows the words to blend and nearly disappear into the material. Through light and shadow, the letters become more legible, but the act of reading the text is still a challenge as the eye is unable to rely upon the typical relationship of black text on a white ground. Here, in the space of the laborer, I am asking the viewer to work a bit, to look closely and focus on the words that have been meticulously stitched and process their significance.

In the making of this piece, I have found myself drawn to the work of painter Glenn Ligon, and the way he chooses to challenge the viewer with his use of text rendered in paint. He explains:

We’re used to seeing text printed, we’re not used to seeing text made out of paint. And there’s a kind of slowness and inefficiency about rendering text in paint that’s interesting to me. It slows your reading down, it slows the viewer down in front of the paintings. And I think we’re in a world that’s very fast, so things that slow you for a minute, that give you pause, I think are good.23

Fig. 14 Glenn Ligon, (miserable) life #17, 2008.

22 Ibid., 70.
That process of slowing the reading down is equally important to me as a maker – rendering each letter stitch by stitch as I more deeply process these various thoughts on labor – and for the viewer who must really spend time with these words as they are subtly raised from the surface of the cloth.

The embroidery work hangs like a banner in the installation. Stretching around the walls of the room – the laborer’s space that I have constructed – it allows the viewer to access the language from any point in the room and draw their own conclusions about the various perspectives on labor that have been put on display. In this constructed space, I have once again acknowledged the floor as space of the laborer. From the outset, my greatest challenge was determining how to create another floor piece that could act as a work of art – an essential entity within the space as opposed to just an overlooked wooden floor. I was pleased to find an article on Carl Andre that clearly addressed his appreciation for this space. The author explains:

…his pieces have commanded space not vertically but horizontally, along the ground, which he describes as partly a practical matter. ‘Art is about seizing and holding space,’ he said. ‘And it was always easier to do that by putting 144 pieces along the floor than by stacking them up.’ (He laughed when it was suggested that, in a sense, his works own the air rights above them.)

In this latest floor piece, I believe that the work does in fact own the vertical space above it as much as the ground upon which it sits. I have intentionally left the floor frozen in a moment of installation. It sits incomplete, indicating the work that is being performed and leaving some evidence of the worker completing the task of filling this space.

As I continued to reflect on the floor, I wondered what would be the best way to ask the viewer to consider the ground they walk upon. I found myself thinking about how we adorn our interiors in order to attract one’s gaze, and was drawn to the history of wallpaper and the

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evolving role it has played in defining interior spaces over the years. Constantly shifting as a symbol of wealth or cleanliness – it has been used among people of lower classes in order to cover up blemishes or bring luxury to the home, and by the wealthy in acknowledgment of their riches – wallpaper has always served to transform space. Although most frequently used to develop the aesthetic of a room and call attention to its beauty and adornment, one is always aware of its impermanence and its ephemeral attempt to reflect upon the status of the owner of the space. Author Gill Saunders states, “Wallpaper becomes a metaphor for dishonesty and dissembling, for the ephemeral as opposed to the secure and lasting, and for the valuing of appearance over substance.” Upon reading this statement, I was immediately drawn to this idea of our valuing of appearance over substance, and wanted to appeal to this tendency to recognize adornment before subject.

I have chosen to apply an ephemeral façade to the surface of my floor, an image that performs much the same role in this space as wallpaper in a room. Drawing people into the laborer’s space, the adornment of the floor asks the viewer to respond to the ground upon which they are walking, preventing them from ignoring its presence. As one spends more time in the space, a conversation is revealed between the text on the wall and the image that exists on the ground. As people move in and out of the room, the adornment I have applied to the floor will slowly break down from use. While the image – a mass-manufactured stencil designed to represent the Arts and Crafts style – is slowly worn away, the floor itself remains. The participant is eliminating the only element in the space that serves to represent industry, and highlights the conversation between the floor’s presence and the text on the wall. The floor, the sole symbol of the worker, holds the personality of the room and remains as the identity of the labor being discussed through the text.

THE SINGULAR LABORER

My practice relies upon myself as the sole maker. I approach the process of making my work as a solitary venture, as I seek to gain an understanding of the identity of the singular worker. I do not ask that the viewer sees me through my work, as I don’t wish to apply any specific personal narrative, but it is my hope that they may recognize the actions of an individual’s effort. I emphasize hand labor to satisfy my own need to create and work with my hands, and also to show what can be accomplished by a solitary maker. The work serves as a challenge to myself as a laborer and as a symbol of the identity of the worker who often goes unacknowledged.

In the introduction to Working, Studs Terkel admits, “In my own case, while putting together this book, I found myself possessed by the mystique of work.”[26] I have fallen in love with this romantic admission. As the singular laborer in the production of my own work, I have found that being charmed by the process is the lone factor that allows me to complete the work and to honor the identity of the anonymous laborer. The laborer depicted, although not myself specifically, is realized through the actions of my hands and the nourishment of my spirit through the work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


EDUCATION

2013 MFA . Virginia Commonwealth University . Richmond, VA . Craft/Material Studies
2005–07 Syracuse University . Syracuse, NY . Communications Design Studies

TEACHING

2012 Adjunct Faculty . Virginia Commonwealth University . Richmond, VA
Fall Semester: Introductory Woodworking Techniques
Adjunct Faculty . Virginia Commonwealth University . Richmond, VA
Summer Session: Introductory Woodworking Techniques

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2013 Woodworking/Furniture Design Faculty Search Committee, Student Member .
VCU Department of Craft/Material Studies . Richmond, VA
Responsible for writing lesson plans, art room maintenance, and teaching
elementary art principles to fourth and fifth grade students.
Creative director designing individual article layouts, spreads, and cover designs,
as well as coordinating a variety of designers’ ideas, into a new magazine about
people and places around Southern Maine.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

work | space (the laborer revealed) . MFA Thesis Exhibition . Anderson Gallery . Richmond, VA
2012 Stamina . Work • Detroit . Detroit, MI
Pushing the Limits 2012 . artspace . Richmond, VA
Then and Now . Rose Contemporary Gallery . Portland, ME
Pause . MFA Candidacy Exhibition . The Visual Arts Center . Richmond, VA
The Works . BFA Thesis Exhibition . Maine College of Art . Portland, ME
BFA show . Maine College of Art . Portland, ME
AWARDS

2013  
VCUarts Graduate Research Grant. Virginia Commonwealth University  
Provided funding for research trip to London to develop knowledge of British textiles.

Graduate School Thesis/Dissertation Assistantship. Virginia Commonwealth University

2012  
VCUarts Graduate Travel Grant. Virginia Commonwealth University

Craft Graduate Scholarship. Virginia Commonwealth University

NICHE Awards Finalist. NICHE Magazine

2011  
Graduate Teaching Assistantship. Virginia Commonwealth University

NICHE Awards Finalist. NICHE Magazine

2010  
Edward M. and Carole J. Friedman Scholarship. Second place award for Maine College of Art Merit Competition.

2008–11  
President's Scholarship. Maine College of Art merit scholarship

WORKSHOPS & CONFERENCES ATTENDED

2013  
Royal School of Needlework. Embroidery Course: Introduction to Whitework: Drawn Thread. London (Surrey), UK. Lizzy Lansberry, Instructor

2012  
Furniture Society Conference. Design, Community & the Sublime. Portland, ME

2010  
Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. Line, Light, and Shadow: An Approach to Basketry Construction. Dail Behennah, Instructor

CITED WORK
