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Making and Meaning

Wage and Labor

Artists have a long history of addressing wage and labor in their work. Whether from the early days of art as a practice, when it was considered a manual labor job on the same level as masonry, or the more recent depictions and relations in the art of modernity, art has always had a relationship with labor. In our modern era even virtual labor is considered. Contemporary artists have chosen to address labor, wage, and the concerns and issues circling both in a variety of ways. Some artists juxtapose items or images with connotations related to labor, some artists physically immersed themselves in the labor. Other artists worked with the laborers in question themselves. As an artist, I too experience labor, whether through my own labor or experiencing the occurrence of work all around me even in daily life.

Contemporary artists may deal with labor by juxtaposing items and images related to labor. One such artist is Kara Walker who chose to juxtapose sugar, factories, and labor and visually create their connections. In her art piece titled “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby” Kara Walker creates similar to life renditions of laboring ethnic children out of molasses and basing them on pictures of children who formerly worked in sugar cane fields. She also created an enormous sphinx out of sugar, to evoke thoughts of labor and ruin. On top of all that, she also installed these pieces in an abandoned Domino sugar factory. Because the sugar industry relied and continues to rely heavily on manual labor, usually labor from other countries such as the H2 workers of the Caribbean, it is not hard to see the parallels she draws between factories, labor, and the people.

Other artists such as Vic Mensa work directly with the laborers to create the art. This artist not only interviewed and filmed the trash pickers of Brazil, but used them and the recyclable material they would pick to create the art pieces that were then photographed and sold. The laborers themselves were also depicted in the artworks, creating these pieces that captured a snapshot of what their lives were. Meaning that the laborers created these pieces representing themselves and their work using materials found during their jobs. Artist Stephanie Rothenberg, mentioned in the lecture given by Helen Molesworth, used the modern virtual world to create her artwork. Rothenberg used the popular virtual world “Second Life” to illustrate parallels between factories, labor, the modern world, and the virtual world. By having real people use their virtual avatars to work creating blue jeans in a virtual factory for virtual money equating to very little in USD, she asks us to question if our leisure time has not become work time in this electronic age. She also has basically created a virtual sweatshop that people still partake in voluntarily, which creates this strange parallel where first world people are working for third world wages and don’t question it.

As an artist myself I too have experienced labor, particularly these last few weeks. I have drawn squares on grid paper, just to exemplify the tedium of much of modern labor. I have recorded the sounds of labor around me as an exercise to notice what is normally heard so passively. And after doing these things a new perspective is gained on how one should find value in their life and their own work. Though, as an artist I find value hard to define in my daily life and artistic practice. Something is not always created, gained, or done right in either of these areas, but if it was enjoyed and you gain at least some knowledge is there not value in it? If there is no monetary gain, is an act of labor without value? And how much has to be gained before one can consider their acts valuable? I am not sure. I suppose the only way I can really define value is in survival value and emotional value. If something helps you live better, healthier, or stronger, then I’d consider it valuable. And if something elicits a pleasurable emotion then that also has value. These two things are by no means mutually exclusive, but I can think of no other way to try and convey what value is to a human in words.