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Hooked: Between Personal and Public Space

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THE A-V-C IN LOCAL INDUSTRY

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It was a pleasantly warm January afternoon when I walked in to the Knoxville Art Museum for the opening reception of Local Industry. This exhibition has generated a lot of anticipation here in the Knoxville area. Artist Anne Wilson had come to visit the region many times to visit the museum, to meet with curator of Adult Education Cris Moliski, the museum's staff, local artists, weaver and mill owners in preparation for Local Industry.

Anne Wilson had a long creative career that has inspired and influenced many contemporary artists across the United States. Her latest work Local Industry provides a platform to reinterpret the meaning of authorship, collaboration and voluntarism in collaborative art practices. My essay focuses on time and how it intersects these concepts in Local Industry. These interactions are only possible in this project through the direct intervention of the hand¹. The hand is central to the production of the artwork, and it introduces the division of labor² for this collaboration. This project uses soft, woven and stitched-together yarns to create the site for the installation. These techniques have imbedded in their processes a keen sense of time. Time operates, not only as an epistemological mean, but also as an ontological element that questions authorship, collaboration and voluntarism³ in the artwork.

I apply the idea of time to understand scale/scope in Local Industry. The word scale is used to define magnitude, relevance and size, but more importantly to address accumulation. The process of accumulation is the mechanism by which the artwork is experienced by the participants and visitors, and what gives the tangible form to the artwork. Accumulation is a result of time. Time also serves to establish the different relationships that this project required for its execution.



Figure 1. Knoxville Art Museum. Courtesy of the Knoxville Art Museum.

¹ Haystack Conference, The Hand, Summer 2010, Maine. <http://www.haystack-mtn.org/conference.php>.

² *The direct, unmediated relationship between labor and its product is the relationship between laborers and the objects of their production.* The relationship between the wealthy man and the objects of production and to production itself is only a *consequence* of these primary relationships. And it, in fact, proves these primary relationships. Therefore, when we ask what the essential relationship of labor is, we are asking about the relationship of *labor* to production. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#S8e> (lines 47,48,49)

³ Billing, Johanna, Lind, Maria and Nilsson, Lars (editors), Taking The Matter into Common Hands: On contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices, p 16.

Local Industry is a site-specific installation that was developed in response to an invitation from the Knoxville Art Museum to Anne Wilson. (Fig. 1) The project responded to the geographical and political location of the museum, which is located in the southeastern United States, in the heart of both hand-weaving traditional and industrial textile manufacturing⁴. Wilson conceived, designed, and executed Local Industry with surgical precision. She carefully designed a detailed instruction manual for the project. This manual included extensive historical research on the labor and textile industries. The success of Local Industry is based on Wilson's clear understanding of what collaboration means, and on the relationship that she, as an artist, wanted to generate around the principle.

The museum's gallery was transformed into a factory. Rows of tables were placed with hand bobbin winders. The installation's space was hybrid. It was a workplace, a classroom, and an artistic space. The installation of the factory⁵ conjured an almost nostalgic resemblance of the group dynamic of an old mill. There was only one loom installed in the gallery, however, to suggest that this space was not a factory, but perhaps an artist's studio or a classroom. These associations were reinforced by other visual elements in the gallery. These included a cascade of hundreds of colorful hand-woven bobbins placed on the opposite wall of the loom, and the large table next to the loom that had hundreds of spools of yarn that were arranged by color and size to create a beautiful landscape that could represent the Appalachian mountains in this region.

The collaboration for this piece was divided into different tiers. Individual textile knowledge and skill levels defined how participants would be part of the project. Local Industry makes a yearning critique to the capitalist division of labor⁶. In Local Industry, the division of labor is based on voluntary and civic participation by collaborators and other participants.

The participation for the visitors was an invitation by the museum staff to learn how to wound a bobbin (Fig. 2) The interactive aspect of the piece allows for several layers in the collaboration: researching by Wilson's research team, making bobbins by museum visitors, and weaving the cloth by seventy-nine experienced weavers from the southeast U.S. The weavers used the wound bobbins to collectively weave a single bolt of cloth, on one loom. At the loom the weavers followed detailed instructions given by Wilson: "sequence relates to exquisite corpse drawing where different weavers worked in one or two day sessions over three months."

Local Industry produced a compelling art experience for the visitors, participants and collaborators. This project culminated with the production of a bulk of cloth, seventy-four feet nine inches long by twenty-four inches wide. Local Industry questioned the meaning of labor⁷ in the post-industrial society and the

⁴ Wilson, Anne, Knoxville Museum of Art, Artist's lecture, April 2010

⁵ The labour of women and children, by sheer robbery of every normal condition requisite for working and living, and by the sheer brutality of overwork and night-work, meets at last with natural obstacles that cannot be overstepped. So soon as this point is at last reached — and it takes many years — the hour has struck for the introduction of machinery, and for the thenceforth rapid conversion of the scattered domestic industries and also of manufactures into factory industries. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#S8e> (paragraph 1: line 1,2,3 and 4)

⁶ We have treated the act of the estrangement of practical, human activity, labor, as having two senses: ... (2) The relationship of labor as an act of production within labor itself. This relationship is a relationship of the laborer to his activity as if it were estranged, as if it didn't belong to him, activity as sorrow, strength as weakness, producing as emasculation, the laborer's own physical and mental energy, his individual life--what is life without activity?--is an activity which turns against him, does not depend on him, does not belong to him. <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/MODERN/ALIEN.HTM> (lines 56,57,58 and 59)

⁷ First, that labor is *alien* to the laborer, that is, that it does not make up his existence, that he does not affirm himself in his labor, but rather denies himself; he does not feel happy, but rather unhappy; he does not grow physically or mentally, but rather tortures his body and ruins his mind. <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/MODERN/ALIEN.HTM>

loss of skill and traditional knowledge due to this process. The accumulation stripes in the cloth made by these seventy-nine skilled weavers reclaimed and revived traditional textile knowledge. This cloth is part of the permanent collection of the Knoxville Museum of Art where over 2,100 individuals are acknowledged in the creation of the cloth.



Figure 2. Hand wound bobbins from Local Industry. Image courtesy Patricia Tinajero

Since the 1990s, collaboration has become a fluid term to house volunteerism, partnerships, collectives, and other social interventions that cross the boundaries of art and life. This project is a grand scale production that required enormous amounts of planning and coordination between volunteers and institutions. New technologies, specifically social networks, and the World Wide Web, are the convergences points for the organization and management of the projects.

This collaborative project has found a balance between individual expression and the unexpected result of collective participation. This has allowed for material experimentation and the practical compilation of traditional, hand-woven textile knowledge, each line and strip of the cloth is the evidence of this. The local industry has created emotional connections between the past and the present, and art and craft. While fulfilling the need to make, do, and be part of a larger project that reaffirms the value of handwork and community effort. The opportunity to be an active agent, or part of an ambitious endeavor, is not limited to industry and government officials, or to corporations. Individuals and small groups could reclaim such opportunities. Artists with ambitious projects provide this terrain for civil participation. Thus, the participants create a new type of relationship between handwork, time, and social participation.

Through collaborative art, artists become active agents of social change. They learn about, they become aware of, and they affect our surroundings by using visual language to address issues that are relevant. These issues range from the environment and cultural identity to social justice in a global context.

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