

the alienation of labor in art

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Dedication to work and responsibility to the ideals of a work ethic have served as national traits unique to the American experience. The social, political, and economic relevance has held the attention of scholars and artists; the social practice of labor has never been of interest. The visual culture of labor and the representation of the worker in late capital America are concepts relevant to my Master of Fine Arts thesis work. Labor as a cultural practice in relation to art is the focus of this research.

In her book, *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture*, Melissa Dabakis states, “During the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, the image of the artisan embodied the traditional values of dignity, morality and diligence; the traits which were associated with the work ethic ideology.” These traditional values were core to the republican economy and ideals of an agrarian based society in antebellum America. The belief in the work ethic held the notion that the worker owned his toil, reaping the successes of his effort. Labor was a meaningful social philosophy which people organized their lives around. The traditional hierarchy of the skilled trades – master craftsman, journeyman, and apprentice – served as the organizing principle of both social and economic life in pre-industrial economy (Dabakis 15). Labor not only created the structure of society, but also lent psychological stability to the individual and represented national progress (Dormer 33).

The industrialization of America meant changes economically, politically and socially and work became a key area of political and economic debate during the nineteenth century. There was an economic conflict between labor and capital (those who owned the means of their production and those who sold their labor). Wage labor was looked upon as a system of slave labor; a system that cheated, demoralized, and enslaved the worker. The repetition of mundane tasks and the use of scientific management began to regulate the lives of most industrial workers. Karl Marx wrote *Alienated Labor* in 1844 and believed that they who controlled work – the means of production – controlled the world. Marx’s theory of alienation connected work conditions to the decline of the human psyche:

The worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object...The worker puts his life into the object; and now it no longer belongs to him, it belongs to the object...The externalization of the worker into his product does not only mean that his work becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him independently, as something alien to him, as confronting him as an autonomous power...The alienation of the worker in his object is expressed within the laws of political economy thus: the more the worker produces, the less

he has to consume; the more values he creates, the less value, the less dignity, he has... (Kamenka 134-135).

Why would a worker show care in his daily work routine when his job had been designed to rule out any sense of individuality?

Influential in the Arts and Crafts context, concepts in John Ruskin's *The Nature of the Gothic* was similar to Marx's observations. Ruskin discussed man's inability to be constantly precise in his actions and the de-humanizing effect of this type of work. Ruskin argued that the way people work, the conditions they work under and the way they make things, is fundamental to the well being of society. William Morris, also a key figure in the development of these ideas, believed creative work would improve the environment, generate psychologically fulfilled peoples and create a more honest economic system.

It was essential to the [capitalist] system that the free labourer should no longer be free in his work; he must be furnished with a master having complete control of that work, as a consequence of his owning the raw material and tools of labour; and with a universal market for the sale of the wares with which he had nothing to do directly, and the very existence of which he was unconscious of. He thus gradually ceased to be a craftsman, a man who in order to accomplish his work must necessarily take an interest in it... Instead of a craftsman he must now become a hand, responsible for nothing but carrying out the orders of the foreman (Dorner 34).

Ruskin and Morris called for rebellion against the constraints of machinery and the division of labor in British social life. Furthermore, Ruskin and Morris condemned industrial capitalism for degrading work, despoiling nature and inhibiting creativity (Debakis14).

During the revival of handicraft, the attempt of the worker [to have some share of the joy of the artist in his work] was a protest against the domination of modern commercial and industrial systems for the production of profit. These systems created the era of technological advance and of machine utilitarianism, merged into what we now see as the beginning of the age of machine implemented culture (Cheney 26). This culture is marked by mass fabrication of materials, mass production of parts, mechanical assembly, and division of labor by specialization. In a society where objects were once made unique and precious and stamped with the mark of the artist's personality, today's requirement of the object is for impersonality.

Working on an assembly line in a factory and experiencing the alienation of the worker firsthand had a prolific effect on my artistic endeavors. Beginning at age fourteen I worked full-time in the summer months and part-time during the

academic year. As a child, my family stressed the financial and moral rewards of hard work. My father was the provider for our family. He worked at a printing factory where he entered into an apprentice program at age twenty four. He played a pivotal role in my development. During my childhood my father spent his spare time working on cars, carpentry, and knife making. He showed me how to “fix things” and how to “use my hands”. In order to accomplish a task, it was important to have the appropriate tool. Since we had little to spend on tools, we would make the tools we needed. The act of making tools provided the opportunity to understand how machines worked. Through knife making and participation with hobbies my father enjoyed, craftsmanship and function were instilled in me. The objects we made needed to function well necessitating good craftsmanship and attention to detail.

When I became employed, I took pride in working to my highest potential. This was necessary to be able to stand-out in a sea of people who were “all the same”. To be the most skilled, most productive, and most efficient gave me a sense of individuality within the mass of workers. A sense of purpose was self-created. While working at a lighting factory I became proficient at every task on the assembly line. Additionally, I found my mind wandering while I worked. Initially, I would think about how I could be more productive at whatever task I was doing and how the assembly line might operate more effectively. These thoughts faded and I found myself thinking about what I was going to do when my workday was over. I would dream of my leisure time and how I would spend it. This helped to pass time and make the day shorter. Leisure time became an extension of working time in that I became the owner of my production. I used my hands and the skills that I “practiced” at work to produce things that I wanted to make. Industry and the machine became the provider of work and the source of recreation after work. I filled my summers by working on old motorcycles; this enabled me to get through the endless days of factory work, and to fulfill my need to create. I took an interest in vintage motorcycles and restored them to working condition using the skills that my father had taught me, the skills that I was learning in college, and the new found processes at the factory. The need to create and to own the means of my production in my spare time was what appealed me during the mundane repetitive days of anonymous factory life.

While in college, I continued to hold a job in a local factory that made a variety of things: lighting fixtures, bleacher seats, children’s playground equipment, motorcycle parts, and government contracted objects. The factory served as inspiration for what was possible in terms of production, process, craftsmanship, and utility. Daily, I was exposed to many types of processes in the manufacturing of goods, and I was intrigued by the creation of something out of nothing, the attention to detail, and the skill in execution and craftsmanship to create a functional object. I questioned the use of advanced technological skills to reproduce the same object repetitively. Why couldn’t the skills of the workers be

put to use in a creative manner? I was also exposed to the people who embodied my father's ideals; people who worked hard for a living and possessed skills that were phenomenal, yet overlooked by their employer and dismissed by themselves.

For practical reasons, I majored in art education, with the hopes of securing a high school teaching position. After enrolling in a Jewelry class I became enthralled by the techniques that were taught, the tools that were used, and the attention to detail and craftsmanship that was stressed. Functionality through design and craftsmanship was something that I had always been exposed to, although I had never realized what it was. I became enthused with every aspect of the metals field including its history. I realized there were parallels that existed between what my father did as a hobby, the labor of a skilled worker, and the function of art.

During graduate studies at the University of Illinois I questioned the role of craft within art. The means of labor and production that held so much meaning and passion for me was virtually disregarded by some members of my faculty. As Paul Greenhalgh writes in his essay on the history of craft, "The celebration of unfettered creative thought led inevitably to the development of artistic processes that eliminated the manual vehicle of artistic expression: skill" (Dormer 42). To have concern with skill or labor was not inline with the avant-garde model; it was a constraint. In order to come to terms with this, I embarked on the creative research that culminated in a thesis.

The need for tools and their usefulness grew out of instinct. This instinct is the basis of humankind; the tradition of tool making is what shaped metalsmithing's history. My choice of pizza cutters stems from the history of metalsmithing and the humanly inherent need for tools. Since the beginning of time, tools have been used to perform specific tasks. The tool becomes an extension of the hand and enables tasks which would not be possible by the hand alone. Although tools are a part of metalsmithing's history, the use of industrial techniques to create a one of a kind object is not. The elemental tools created from stone, wood, and clay have made way to machine-age materials and instruments. My work investigates one of a kind objects and their role in a world based on mechanical reproduction. Industry has removed the aura from objects and stripped them of their individuality. My pizza cutters seek to demolish the sterile conformity of mass produced objects.

The decade after World War II brought a level of conformity that has continued to shape a nation which once celebrated regional and personal differences. Franchises became the norm and television advertising infused a system of identical vision to create a homogeneous culture. The constricting nature of conformity gave way to the emergence of fringe culture groups and

nonconformist rebellion against authority. These groups deliberately opted for an outlaw lifestyle and defined themselves through their style of dress and mode of transport. Eileen Boris writes about the development of cultural identity in America based on the Ruskin/Morris model in her book *Art and Labor*:

At first glance, the story of what happened in America is a story of failure, of a twisted dream, of how what began as a critique of art and labor under industrial capitalism turned into a style of art, leisure activity, and personal and social therapy. But seen from another angle, the devotion of the craftsman ideal provides a key to understanding cultural identity and class formation during a crucial period of social transformation. The history of the arts and crafts movement belongs to the history of the middle class, its fear and hatred of class conflict, its own loss and redefinition of autonomy and independence, its somewhat uncomfortable search for bodily ease, its creation of rebels within its own midst (Boris XIV-XV).

The outlaw biker image is a break from the conformity that has taken over America since industrialization. The chopper motorcycle represents the antithesis of convention and conformity. The “over the top design”, use of gaudy ornamentation and over-exaggerated form of choppers in the fifties and sixties represented a means of escape from everyday responsibilities and blue-collar jobs. The chopper became a uniquely American backlash against the engineering comforts of the post-economic boom. The custom bike became a way of transcending the mundane existence of the work week through the close identification with a highly personalized vehicle. My work represents the stylistic and flamboyant embellishment of these groups who live on the fringe of popular culture. The pizza cutters and chopper motorcycle I created for the MFA thesis embodies these same ideals and at the same time becomes an alternative to the conformity of the so called avant-garde and their production of commodity (Image 1, page 8). My machined pizza cutters draw inspiration from chopper motorcycles that are built by people in a subculture that attempts to reclaim the mythology and economic usefulness of the American worker as patriarch; translating machine or functional object into flesh and blood (Image 2, page 9). The outlaw as defiant nonconformist, as well as social outcast is a parallel to being an artist who makes functional objects and an individual who takes pride in the power of labor, invention, and skill.



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