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### Deaccessioning the Studio

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Deaccessioning the Studio

by

Ayla Rexroth

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2016

Thesis Sponsor:

December 21, 2016

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Date

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First Reader

December 21, 2016

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Date

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Second Reader

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In my work, I explore systems of hierarchy and etiquette in an attempt to bend social and institutional rules in favor of supporting the under-represented, such as emerging artists, women and diverse populations. Through various forms of economy such as selling art on the street, gifting, and building capital as a generating mechanism of the work, I present my projects in public spaces and utilize institutional space for my artistic ends. Operating in this manner requires that my work maintain a sense of portability and adaptability in relationship to the necessary functions of the site that it occupies.

Theorist Judith Butler writes about the meaning of moving through public space while employing strategies to contest the distinction between public and private. She posits that we can claim public space with our bodies when we appear en masse and with the intention of “seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the past few years I have created several micro-businesses that provide tools and facilitate experiences to help people meet their potential and gain access to opportunity. *Curb*, is a mobile, curated gallery space, that exists inside the drawers of a refurbished mid-century dresser. Inspired by the pervasive use of mid-century modern style furniture in New York galleries and art fairs, *Curb's* design resembles a reception desk or information kiosk, while the exterior of the

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<sup>1</sup> Butler, Judith. "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street." Lecture, The State of Things, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Venice. September 2011.

dresser provides a surface to feature vinyl 'wall texts' and curatorial materials. The inaugural exhibition displayed artworks by seven emerging artists that were installed inside the dresser drawers. It included video works running on battery packs, museum-like vitrines holding ceramic sculpture, miniature installations, and mixed media works all using the site and interactive action of opening the drawer. I prompted the exhibiting artists to make jumps in logic about their relationship to the locations by adding lines to their resumes under the title of...

*Shift/Leverage/Move: Curb of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2015*

The exhibition traveled to several sidewalks outside the doors of New York's most established galleries and museums, and occupied the sidewalks facing the doorways. This exhibition strategy and site created a level of proximity between the dresser and the building that contrasted, conversed and at times conflated the two institutions. Usurping the hosting gallery's audience by using this party-crashing tactic, was meant to create a situation of self-consciousness, where hopping between major galleries to view the work of established artists now included a moment to consider the sheer volume of New York-based artists existing outside the mainstream. The traveling frame of the dresser compacted with the artist's work suggested a group action with an exchange of service of my work, as organizer with theirs, as visual artist.

Another form of exchange of services is in the project *Grown Pockets*, a custom tailoring service in the form of pocket extensions and additions to women's outerwear. Women's clothing is often designed with small or fake pockets which hinders women's flexibility while navigating the world. I offer the

free pocket extensions in an attempt to help women feel more in control while in public space.

The position I am taking in favor of more and better pockets for women has been in conversation for over a century and even written about in a *New York Times* piece from 1895 humorously titled, *A Plea for the Bloomers*. Here the author flippantly remarks that, "As we become more civilized, we need more pockets," stating that, "no pocketless people has ever been great since pockets were invented, and the female sex cannot rival us while it is pocketless."<sup>2</sup>

As part of my thesis exhibition I will produce a prototype of a custom made coat with hand sewn pocket extensions as a business proposition to serve women. What is of interest to me are the psychological forces around this gesture and its form in providing a product that could offer an exponentially beneficial effect.

The concept of the container in psychoanalytic theory and cognitive science is an established model of how people construct meaning in relationship to the container of the body.<sup>3</sup> Psychiatrists Rosenbaum and Garfield write in *Metaphor and Psychoanalysis* that our psychic beings are made from three realities: sensory, fantasy, and socio-interactive dimensions.<sup>4</sup> The portability and contained parameters of the project allows for the socio-interactive dimension of

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<sup>2</sup> "A Plea for The Bloomers." *New York Times*. Accessed October 10, 2016. 1895.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenbaum, Bent, and Garfield, David. "Metaphor and Psychoanalysis: Containers, Mental Space, and Psychodynamics." *PsyArt*. December 01, 2001. [http://psyartjournal.com/article/show/rosenbaummetaphor\\_and\\_psychoanalysis\\_containers\\_m](http://psyartjournal.com/article/show/rosenbaummetaphor_and_psychoanalysis_containers_m).

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

narrative to manifest. The interaction could spark conversations about what we should expect from our clothing, and generate dialogue about unpacking oppressive mechanisms. The advertising language surrounding the project presumes that the container of the body has inherent value stating, "Increase your private space in public" and "Keep your valuables close to the vest" treating the pocket as bonus space for the mind and body to fill.

For my thesis exhibition, *Deaccessioning the Studio*, I will frame the 205 Hudson Street Gallery entrance with an installation that will consist of a collection of handmade and refurbished housewares and furniture pieces that I have salvaged, fabricated, decorated, and amassed such as, dressers, coffee tables and lamps. I will construct sculptural platforms that will mimic the high-end retail display found throughout the Tribeca and Soho neighborhoods and low-end paraphernalia on Canal Street. Creating a conceptually driven storefront is in line with the modality of the area in which the gallery is located.

The collection of furnishings has been inherited, thrifted, stored and discarded and my labor has been to fix, redesign and re-present the objects into polished re-contextualized commodities. *Deaccessioning the Studio* will take place in the form of an auction held at the exhibition's opening. In artist Pablo Helguera's satirical *Manual of Contemporary Style* he defines the auction as an event "where one finally abandons the pretense that art has an abstract value, and which exemplifies the idea that the ultimate objective of owning art is to sell

it.”<sup>5</sup> The furniture, cultural memorabilia, and artworks traditionally sold on the platform of auction houses points out a radical distinction in the way collectors buy and experience art and cultural objects versus how they consume, use and view utilitarian domestic objects. The housewares and furniture in my auction will stand as concrete representations of their own market value while embodying the “irreducible condition of their existence as art.”<sup>6</sup>

The practicality of liquidating my studio calls an entirely different set of needs and social issues into question. A studio practice after graduation is a dilemma for many MFA students who depend on government backed student loans to make artworks in major cities. This struggle creates more scenarios where artists are easily caught in the artist-real estate gentrification cycle. Liquidating the materials from the my studio will circumvent this among many other economic realities by building into the work an exit strategy that will allow me to leave the MFA program only with a set of tools.

Using the remaining materials in my studio I will build a storefront display and adopt retail presentation modes such as raised platforms and controlled lighting in order to make a critique on value and purported value. The wooden platforms, wall mounted shelves, and fabric backdrops will be viewed by gallery visitors as well as to the passerby on the street and over the course of the exhibition the installation will change from a display stocked with goods to a reductive minimal structure in a white cube. The form of the installation will follow

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<sup>5</sup> Helguera, Pablo. *Manual of Contemporary Art Style*. (New York, NY: Jorge Pinto Books, 2007), 91.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. (New York, NY: Verso, 2012), 6.

the function of holding the furniture, but as the objects are sold and disappear only the formal relationships of the structure will remain. Keeping the installation in flux will shift the concept from one that denotes practicality, profitability, and interaction to one that relies on formal relationships. The adherence to a stricter idea of artistic and aesthetic autonomy will allow the viewer to explore several conditions of relating to and contemplating the value of an artwork.

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## Image List

Fig. 1. Deaccessioning the Studio Installation, 2016

Fig. 2. Painted Cotton Panel (Installation detail), 2016

Fig. 3. Vintage Drink Cart (Installation detail), 2016

Fig. 4. Arched Mirrors (Installation detail), 2016



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4