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Moving From the Gray Area: What is (my) art [at Hunter] right now?

By

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1: Content: *What is Art?*

In his essay *Artists in Times of War*, Howard Zinn puts forth the idea that artists are uniquely poised in society to live lives that are instructive of how to participate in the world (8). Through history artists have stepped outside of whatever the defined parameters of our “profession” was at that moment in history in such a way that demonstrates the limitations of a strictly defined professional stance when it becomes time to take on complex moral choices. Zinn argues that because the parameters of our livelihood as artists ask us to physically manifest what does not exist yet, our practices are uniquely poised on the edge of the idea of professionalism in a way that is demonstrative of the more subtly precarious moral position of any professional parameter (11). Artists have the opportunity to exemplify the act of transcendence in our practices, and to claim the natural-ness of doing many things besides making art, but do them *as an artist*. Zinn says that through time, it has been artists who stand against war that remind us that we can be historians against war, steel-workers against war, and ultimately people against war - whatever the war may be.

I have come to believe that Zinn’s observations about artists are true because the concept of “art” itself is an invention of our current global paradigm; an attempt of capitalism to reconcile itself with the much older, broader concept of “culture”. Art is a slippery word: It can slide back and forth between modalities. In today’s world, “Art” operates as a commodity economy within the ideological confines of what philosopher Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism”, which he defines as the limited space of our contemporary collective imagination that is our current world (16). Art simultaneously operates in the secular realms of life that we name “culture”— serving the human needs that are also filled through activities that we categorize as religious, ritual, or spiritual. In this way art is essentially non-economic, and carries within it the unique possibility of moving human being outside of capitalist realism, and into many other ideas of what the future or the present could be.

Understanding art to be a word that is constantly moving inside and outside of capitalist realism, I believe art in itself to be a contradiction of terms, an undefinability. This ambiguity is problematic but also provides a spaciousness: the word “art” leaks on to the people who take it on: calling one’s self an artist as an identity signifier allows an artist to shepherd offerings between modes of being. Zinn’s writing on the political impact of artists (12-30) — along with many others- show us how wielding the identity of “artist” with intention has historically been
critical to transformation of the state of the world on a moral level: which we might define here as a synthesis of the economic and the spiritual. In a moment in history of constant physical, economic, ecological and cultural violence, I take Zinn’s assessment of how artists ought to respond to a war as instructions for how to operate in every day life.

The strategic practice of cultural production is the medium I place my work within. My thesis writing for Hunter will attempt to trace the cycle of my own cultural production during my time at Hunter in relationship to the organizing work that occurred concurrently with it. To do this, I will contextualize my practice in terms of personal narrative before entering school, discuss the body of art and organizing work I undertook through my time at Hunter, articulate progress in the materiality of my work during this time, and put forward questions that my upcoming cycle of work, which begins with my thesis, will undertake to address.

2: Form: What is my art?

The story I believe my life poises me to tell is a story of the failures of the American dream. As the story of how one becomes artist, it is not extraordinary. I was born in New York City, into a liberal, educated, white, upper class Jewish family, four generations into an iconic story of upward mobility. My great-grandfather came to the US from Russia as a young child to escape a Pogrom, a wave of European anti-Semitic violence. He became involved in real estate, amassing wealth by building housing for returning G.I’s. He moved his family to the suburbs, assimilated to whiteness and ascended towards the owning class, eventually growing a booming business in hotels that he passed on to his kids and grandkids. Under the surface of this story of success is a less happy narrative; equally iconic if less often exposed. The story of my family’s generations in America is one of money mismanagement and embezzlement, greed and fear, alcoholism and depression, intergenerational lawsuits and prison sentences. It is also a story of swapped class and racial affiliation, and in this way is a story of how assimilation operates to maintain American racism and class stratification. Whatever I do with my life, it will be a continuation of this story. My hope is that as an artist and activist, I continue the story in a way that undoes some of the structural violence that my ancestors participated in and suffered from, that makes the world more just.

Endemic of contemporary American society, my comfortable childhood was filled with lots of art. The arts were the place I felt most at home, and I was singled out for the seriousness of my pursuits, though never particularly for my innate talents. By the time I was a teenager, I’d settled into the habit of calling myself an Artist, understanding it as a functional mechanism for making myself palatable to the people in my world: a childhood of
mood swings instantly explained by “Oooh, she’s an Artist!” Around this time, an art teacher sent me to Chelsea to see art galleries, and I stumbled into an exhibition called “Cavemanman” by Thomas Hirschhorn. As in each of Hirschhorn’s installations, the central concept (cavemen) was interrogated on ideological, historical, cultural, and visual levels, in a blur of relentless, urgent meaning-making that presents data about the world such that it registered strongly at an affective level. Hirschhorn’s installation captured the complexity of the world without divorcing it from emotionality: it felt like complexity in addition to stating it. In my memory, it was in that room that I made the decision to be an artist for the rest of my life.

Since that moment of self-definition, I’ve been to few places that substantively mourned or soothed the ache of confronting the world we live in. All of them have been immersive art spaces like Hirschhorn’s installation, but generally found outside of the formalized art world. I think of my work in relationship to places like the Elsewhere Museum of Greensboro NC, The St. Louis City Museum, The Noah Purifoy museum in Joshua Tree, CA, and Bread and Puppet theater in Glover, Vermont— and in each of them, I have had moments of personal transformation that echo that first feeling of being in Hirschhorn’s installation. It is not an accident that my memory creates stories of my own purpose and meaning against the backdrop of these spaces: they are what we have that makes the tragedy of our world and the possibility of a better one feel more real than our contemporary dreck.

Many use Hakim Bey’s term the Temporary Autonomous Zone to describe the sensory reaction to the divergent space I am describing. I also understand these artisan-created, transformation-inducing places as taking part in the historical trajectory of places of worship.

The fact that I am an artist points in two opposing directions that correspond to the conflicting ways art operates. From one vantage point: being an artist compounds my own privileges. By taking on the title of artist, I translate acts of dissent, divergence or refusal into forms that can be attributed to my own accomplishment. It is through the lens of being an artist that my participation in social movements grants me opportunities to engage in the media, and the milestones of my life that can be ascribed to archetypes of the artist (including the very fact of being in graduate school) remain the ways that my family and friends from my affluent upbringing relate to me.

Simultaneously, I do the work I do as an artist because of the evidence - on both societal and personal levels - that art is a unique key to liberating myself (and all of us) from the cycles of inequality that these privileges carry.

3: Synthesis: What is my artwork at Hunter?
In many ways, my life as an activist-artist began with the Occupy Movement, where I first made flow-charts for reproduction and use by activists, and connected to others who understand their creative work in terms of social movements. At the time I began graduate school, I had just finished a number of projects about climate change that were spun out of Occupy, and I thought that what I’d done was insufficient. I re-entered school specifically troubled by the lack of substantive, politically aligned, complexly contemporary work about the climate crisis, looking to spend some years in the studio building a practice that could rise to the challenge of naming this crisis. I had chosen this moment to go back to school on the assumption that I had a lull of activist activity ahead of me—a years-long hang-over after the intensity of Occupy. I had the goal of developing my skills as a cultural producer by focusing on climate change, so that I would both produce new tools for this particular struggle, and use those skills to contribute to future waves of social movements.

I couldn’t have known, when I made the choice to return to school, that the wave of organizing cycling around the People’s Climate March was about to hit New York City, and that my years at Hunter would be spent not just contemplating climate change and social movement building in the studio, but simultaneously connecting to organizers across the city and country who were taking on exactly this intersection of problems in the streets. And so, my years at Hunter have been spent entirely not-theoretically, but forging production tactics in real time that bridged the gap between the white box and the street, between art and organizing. That I thought nothing would pull me from the studio during these three years is a sign of how naive I was and still am, and how much of a student of change-making I still consider myself to be, even as I prepare to complete my formal years as a student.

My time working on the People’s Climate March culminated in the studio in a performance/installation entitled The Gray Area, a research space for the current moment in today's climate crisis. I constructed and inhabited The Gray Area from October 2014 until January 2016, the months between my mid-program review and the beginning of my thesis work, and also the months between the People’s Climate March and the 21st Conference of the Parties in Paris (or COP 21). COP 21 was the final gathering of a 25 year-long negotiation process for confronting the global climate crisis. The Gray Area was a performative studio practice designed to formalize my reciprocally transformative experiences working in art spaces and street protests. The work did not just result in a static presentation, but also helped to forge a methodology for moving between these poles, using these simultaneous milestones in my art studies and the climate movement as an example. The developmental process is as intrinsic to my work as the final result exhibited.
The project took cues from installation, collage and social practice methodologies, building up a series of interrelated artworks that are encountered within the space of their own production. The primary ideological practices of *The Grey Area* were explicitness and earnestness. Explicitness was practiced through the relentless inclusion of source text, explanation, and reflection, as well as the presence of the artist's body, hand, process and narrative. The dominant form of explicitness was signage, a vocabulary derived from political protest signage, organizer’s offices and notes-to-self. The explicit, via signage, was employed as a means of communicating activist action not as a manifestation of knowing, but of the *yearning* to know. The yearning to know was made visible through means that are temporary, subjective, and immediate: pictorial fragments, post-its, scrawled handwriting—materials that index to figuring, learning, sorting, caring, trying: to investment and urgency. In this space, introspection and emotiveness were legible to visitors to the space through fragments that came together towards the surfacing of wisdoms stewarded by the presence of the various art-objects and the artist. The piece attempted to synthesize without simplifying, bringing the wholeness of experience of the artist’s political, creative struggles into unity through shared physical and ideological space.

The Gray Area was built out of post-it notes, print-outs of low-resolution images of protests culled from Facebook and google, custom-made uniforms, painted cardboard signs, elementary school bulletin board decorations, round and chisel-tip sharpies, paint chips and architectural color swatches, painter’s tape, recycled paper flowers, and scratched high-gloss photo portraits. All materials were color-coordinated in accordance with abstract categories derived from the content: Gray (for the complexity of the present), Green (for the baggage of the past of the environmental movement) and Yellow (for the future, the sun continuing to rise). Information was primarily organized in sequences: lines or piles of same-sized and/or color coordinated elements, whose visual likeness pointed to a shared lens on the larger issue at hand. All photographs in the Gray Area depict people in resistance: either directly engaged in the act of street protest, or lauded and quoted for their role as an activist leader. All imagery that is not photographic is self-referential, in the forms of schematic drawings of the Gray Area itself or flowers made from scrap-paper from the project. Imagery punctures a sea of text: more text than an individual viewer can possibly read. As I moved materials into the Gray Area, I assessed the success of each choice using the rubrics of *investment* and *urgency*: *Does this help the space communicate the urgency of the issue? Does it make clear my investment in it?* I could tell when I was succeeding when visitors reflected back emotive experiences that mirrored mine: that the space asked them to dwell in complexity, to feel both despair and hope. Witnesses to The
Gray Area reflected back that it was about climate change specifically and also about many other things, that it was simultaneously welcoming and uncomfortable to be inside.

During my time in The Grey Area I produced one large drawing not entirely unlike the work I produced before entering Hunter; a text-heavy image that was created through dialogue with other activists, in response to particular conditions of movement-building. This diagrammatic piece is designed to be reproduced for display as an initiator of pedagogical conversation- a politicization of domestic and public spaces. It is also explicitly designed to be a commodity: an object that is cheap to produce but, because it is beautiful, carries value beyond its materiality, and so can operate as a fundraising tool or as a manifestation of gratitude (a gift).

The diagram I made in the Gray area was aesthetically and conceptually more ambitious than any work I had done before, by several orders of magnitude. This is because of the expanded material methodology that I concretized through the making of Gray Area, a product in and of itself that I will carry with me as a tool into the next phase of my work.

4: Context: What is my art at Hunter right now?

Earlier in this essay, I describe my aesthetic tactics in terms of first their intent and impact, and then purely in terms of their materiality. I do this in order to illustrate the way in which, through the Gray Area I was able to develop a set of materials that were curated for their conceptual and affective alignment with my work’s vision, and then to adapt these deliberate choices as an aesthetic programming that came to feel intuitive. This materiality was developed in response to aesthetic hurdles I faced entering Hunter, How do I make art about protest that does not appear nostalgic? How do I communicate about technically complex issues without erasing emotive content? How do I express firm emotive content without triggering an affect of preachiness, or losing my audience’s attention to a sense of didacticism that is understood as simplistic? How do I make art that points towards conversation that makes my own political expertise useful to my community without pretending to be an all-knowing expert? The Gray Area allowed me to calibrate a set of aesthetic cues that do not (at least as strongly or as frequently) set off the distracting flairs of objection to my work that I’ve experienced before making The Gray Area. The details of this project seem to make a difference: how differently the reaction is when I use post-its vs. scraps of paper thumb-tacked to the wall. The difference in response to writing done with chisel-tipped markers, the ways in which it does and doesn’t work to communicate information via a cardboard sign. The materiality of the Gray Area now exists a
medium that I can expand, shift and produce a potentially endless combination of works within. I describe my way of working coming out of the The Gray Area as automatic because of the leap in material clarity this piece provided, so that making work now feels vastly more intuitive. I’ve answered some basic aesthetic and materials questions that let me get down to business with increasingly nuanced, focused and ambitious content in my work.

My thesis aims to deepen and further the ideological/material matrix put forth by The Gray Area with three substantive shifts: one in form, one in materiality, and one in content.

The content of this new piece will aim to lift up the historical root causes of climate change: which bell hooks calls the “Imperialist, White Suprematist, Capitalist Patriarchy” (17). I understand climate change is a symptom of this interlocking set of structural inequities, and see that addressing the problem substantively requires looking at the ways ongoing colonial legacies continue to play out, and making a plan for moving to a new economy and ecology that rights these wrongs. During the time I was working on the Gray Area, my own understanding of this reality deepened, and it became clear that the frameworks I had set up within which to make art were not designed to communicate or digest the long historic arch that led to climate change. I know that the ignorances that lead to the shortcomings of the framework of The Gray Area are not an anomaly, but rather represent the blind spots in current social movements and society at large.

However, in the last year the social conditions within which I was making art changed substantively. The Black Lives Matter movement exploded across the USA, expanding dialogue and rhetoric about black liberation, anti-black violence, and white supremacy, and affecting the media and public policy. This new ideological landscape provides an expanded space for talking about global legacies of racism, and identity-based organizing of all sorts, be it gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, spiritual practice, etc…). The result of this landscape is a new public urgency to parse out how collective stories relate to the matrices of structural inequities we live within-bolstering everything from the global Transgender liberation movement to Bernie Sander’s political campaign. In what I understand as a somewhat direct backlash, the last year has seen the rise of a newly emboldened, explicitly xenophobic thread of the white American politics and culture, centered around Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, which now is triggering a heightened emotiveness, simultaneously more fearful and more fearless, from Latino/migrant and Muslim/Arab organizing communities (the primary targets of rage of Trump’s campaign), as well as North American Indigenous and Leftist Jewish organizing circles. The histories of exploitation upon which the USA and the contemporary global economy are built - as well as the long history of resistance to these forces -
are palpable, alive and being played out in public consciousness in a substantively more explicit way than when I started *The Gray Area*.

My thesis work at Hunter aims to serve as an experimental intervention in the relevance of climate change to this newly heightened, public ideological clash. I will gather the corners of observations about white colonial legacies that were in The Gray Area, add a layer of historical and sociological research about the dual crisis of white supremacy and climate change, and engage organizers in the questions posed by this body of literature. I will attempt to create a space that connects the dots between climate change and *imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy* (Hooks 17) as an experiment in forging a more deeply emotional resonant vocabulary for speaking about the condition of civilization that has produced climate change. My goal is to make a ritualized space for connecting the dots between disparate threads of contemporary crisis, and thus encountering the profound terror and possibility of this moment.

Expanding the historic and ideological arch of my work to include a deeper analysis of structural inequities requires many adjustments in the visual and material vocabulary that comprises the medium of my work. A new symbolic language de-centers the specific histories of the climate movement and complicates the concept of history. I have abandoned a color palette that is pulled from associations within environmentalist culture and have developed a new one that pulls from a larger set of associations: Blue and turquoise represent the color of clarity and possibility: the ocean, my eyes, turquoise stone. Gold and browns represent the long legacies of extraction from the earth, both sustainably and unsustainably- gold, soil. Peaches and pinks represent the subjectivity of human experience - the colors used in my iconography referring to my own race and gender. The emphasis on an historical arc lodged in contemporary events also asks me to think through greater historical implications of my own positionally as an artist, and to attempt to create a visual vocabulary that can speak to the impact, on a macro scale, of the reality of racism and of class. I will attempt to do this by introducing a visual vocabulary of shapes (still in development) that de-neutralize the rectangle as the vehicle for content. I will also make design choices based in historical research of patterning. I will employ decorative tropes of churches and greco-roman architecture, using my practices of text-based explicitness as a vehicle for aesthetic grounding of what exploitation has looked like historically. I will also pull decorative tropes from Jewish scriptures (talmud, katubah) and explain these aesthetic histories as a means of asserting subjectivity, embedding iconography that come from my own family history.

This new piece will take the form of an immersive structure that, unlike the Gray Area, will be custom-
built, freestanding, and portable. In addition to adding a subjective and historically trackable dimension to the
architectural decisions, this shift in form will also shift the relationship between my artwork and its subject.

Formally, the greatest struggle with the Gray Area was that it was stationary. I could not bring it to colleagues whose
wisdom informed the work, and so many less of them saw it than might have. The fact that The Gray Area existed
within a studio at Hunter served as a conceptual frame that undermined, rather than amplified, the piece itself. This
limited the impact of the work to the realm of representation— which I do not see as insignificant, only incomplete.
The Gray Area in and of itself could never be a piece of art in the world of activity it is constructed to illuminate, it
can only be about that world of activism. The form of the Gray Area as a studio lodges it in the economic orbit of
the formal art world, where spaces such as studios exist to begin with. I think that the visual tactics I’m developing
are of most use to the world outside of this context, and within the larger strategic arch of my work as a cultural
organizer. Thus, I need to find ways of taking my space-based visual world with me in to the material economy of
social movements. As a final step in my studies at Hunter, I intend to create work in my current material mode that
takes the form of a space that can move; and thus, through artistic practice, to physically create space for expanded
dialogue in the places where social movements happen: community centers, church basements, crowded apartments,
the street. I will take this space with me into the first floor gallery as my thesis, and then out of Hunter with me to
the places I go next.
Works Cited

