

CASTON, JULIA, M.F.A. Let's Talk Over Coffee. (2017)
Directed by Chris Cassidy. 28 pp.

I am driven by generosity, both on the part of myself as well as participants in my work. My art is an extension of my life, in that I attempt to understand myself by creating situations in which I communicate and connect with other people. I am constantly attempting to become more human, and the best version of myself, and I want to know how others are attempting to do the same. My work creates exchange, dialogue, and inclusion. Participation of other parties is key in rendering the work possible. I draw on the traditions of performance art and social practice in contextualizing my artwork. Economic transaction is a dominant theme, and the use of coffee as a commodity product is a manifestation of the exchanges that take place. Most of all, I am driven by generosity, both on the part of myself as well as participants in my work. My art is an extension of my life, in that I attempt to understand myself by creating situations in which I communicate and connect with other people. I am constantly attempting to become more human, and the best version of myself, and I want to know how others are attempting to do the same.

LET'S TALK OVER COFFEE

by

Julia Caston

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2017

Approved by

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Julia Caston has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Chris Cassidy

Committee Members _____
Lee Walton

Jennifer Meanley

Lawrence Jenkins

Sheryl Oring

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|------------------------------|------|
| LET'S TALK OVER COFFEE | 1 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 15 |
| CATALOGUE OF IMAGES..... | 16 |

LET'S TALK OVER COFFEE

I am driven by generosity, both on the part of myself as well as participants in my work. My art is an extension of my life, in that I attempt to understand myself by creating situations in which I communicate and connect with other people. I am constantly attempting to become more human, and the best version of myself, and I want to know how others are attempting to do the same. My work creates exchange, dialogue, and inclusion. Participation of other parties is key in rendering the work possible. I draw on the traditions of performance art and social practice in contextualizing my artwork. Economic transaction is a dominant theme, and the use of coffee as a commodity product is a manifestation of the exchanges that take place. Most of all, I am driven by generosity, both on the part of myself as well as participants in my work. My art is an extension of my life, in that I attempt to understand myself by creating situations in which I communicate and connect with other people. I am constantly attempting to become more human, and the best version of myself, and I want to know how others are attempting to do the same.

In this thesis, I will focus on three projects which dominated my graduate career: *Trophies for Artists*; *This Is My Day Job*; and *Privilege Coffee*. In each work, I created a specific structure in which interactions, exchanges, and

dialogues occurred. With each new project, I focused on issues pertaining to participation, my role as a facilitator/artist, and the role of art in mediating privilege. In order to contextualize my art practice, it is helpful to have an understanding of the field of socially engaged art, also referred to as social practice. This field often requires the participation of others to make the work possible and can often take on experiences that are part of everyday life. In the preface of the book *What We Made*, Tom Finkelpearl espouses the term “social cooperation” as it includes an artist-facilitator and willing participants who, through their cooperation with the artist, made the work possible (Finkelpearl 6). As an example, Finkelpearl describes *Key to the City* by Paul Ramirez Jonas, in which members of the public in New York were given keys that lead to secret compartments in museums, taqueria kitchens, and other points of interest (3). Part of the artwork, in this case, was the exploration of the city by the participants.

Within social practice or social cooperative art, there is dialogical art, as described by Grant Kester in *Conversation Pieces*. According to Kester, “The concept of dialogical art practice is derived from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation - a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view,” (Kester 10). Kester ascribes this meaning to artworks which at their heart have conversation as the focus. For example, the Austrian collective WochenKlauser brought together politicians, sex workers, and activists for a three-hour boat

cruise on Lake Zurich in 1994. As a result of the conversations that took place, the group came to a consensus regarding boarding houses for sex workers who had no other safe place to sleep at night (2). While there was a humanitarian aspect to this dialogue, WochenKlausur contextualized their involvement as artists and the resulting conversations as part of the artwork. While my own work does not serve a specific instrumental purpose, the thread of dialogue and conversation is prevalent.

My first project, *Trophies for Artists*, has been a constant thread throughout my two years in the graduate program, and includes almost 40 pieces. Initially, it was conceived as a joke in response to critiques during my first semester. It seemed that I would receive one critique about my work one day, and the opposite critique the next day. I decided that since it seemed that the measurement of art was so arbitrary, anyone could win at art as long as they self-identified as an artist, bought me a cup of coffee, and talked to me for at least 20 minutes while I consumed the coffee. Then they would receive a trophy signifying that they won at art and would get to keep it. This undercurrent of humor has permeated many of my projects as a way to undermine authority or dominant ideas about art. While attempting to democratize the idea of who gets to be an artist, I was also fulfilling my personal coffee habit. As I had just begun my graduate career, I had taken a significant pay cut, and this seemed like a great way to obtain fancy espresso beverages. However, soon the time required to make the trophy-sculptures and the cost of supplies began to far outstrip the

value of a cup of coffee. On the surface, it may seem that this exchange disproportionately favored the winner of the trophy. However, I was receiving a conversation, material/inspiration from which to make a sculpture, and a guaranteed home for my work. These gains make the exchange more than worthwhile for me.

The specific labeling of the trophies is essential to the artwork and underscores the importance of the symbolic meaning of the object as well as the exchange that occurred. This can be seen in the label for *Trophy for Matthew Hayes*, Figure 1. The fact that these sculptures are labelled “trophies” emphasizes that they are awards and are related to winning, even though they may not look like conventional trophies. This points to their double nature as art objects. For instance, the awards are often visual metaphors for the conversation that took place over coffee. In figure 1, the conversation topic was the recipient’s experience of speaking in tongues. The trophy itself is a ceramic tongue covered with imitation grass, with tongues sticking out of it, forming a type of “tongue Stonehenge,” simultaneously clever and bizarre. Unlike traditional trophies, these objects employ a huge range of materials, including found objects, clay, plaster, glass, welded steel, and moss. Thus, these objects extend the idea of what a trophy can be.

The other information on the labels for the trophies is equally important, and appears in didactic form next to the object. The reference to the media that the awardee works in is related to the condition of winning: one must self-identify

as an artist. I include the “what I drank” information, as the beverage I consumed was part of the exchange and adds specificity to the interaction. Most importantly, the topic of the conversation contextualizes the exchange and points to the importance of dialogue in making the creation of the trophy-object. The location of the conversation, including the coordinates, adds to the particularities and importance of the conversation event. Finally, the label lists the materials from which the trophy was made, which points to the very physical nature of the trophy as an art object. In this manner, the labelling of the trophies thus highlights the importance of exchange, conversation, and self-identification as an artist in this project.

In the project *Trophies for Artists*, the role of dialogue is tied to the question of audience. When the trophies are exhibited they are shown to a secondary audience, and the primary audience is always the winner of the trophy who will then get to own it and live with it. Moreover, the term ‘audience’ is an incomplete one in this case, as without the winner, the trophy would not exist, the winner is therefore an integral participant in its creation. My personal relationship with the winners is a key aspect of the work. Most of the trophies made in Greensboro were won by my professors and peers in the graduate program. I felt it was important to focus on my own immediate artistic community. Due to this pool of participants, I had prior knowledge of my ‘audience’ in addition to the conversation that took place at the coffee shop. In order to expand my pool of participants, I travelled to an artist residency at the Inverness County Centre for

the Arts in Inverness, Nova Scotia. Each day, I talked to a new artist whom I had never met before over coffee. In creating these new relationships, I became aware of the artistic community in a place that where I had never been. Thereby, the sum of the many conversations I experienced created a greater whole. I was able to more fully focus on the conversation event, because I had no prior knowledge of the participants.

The objecthood and materiality of the trophy is critical to its role as a social mediator. Though my work deals with social practice and participation, I am also a maker of physical things and take great joy in this activity. In his essay, "Towards a Sociability of Objects," Edward Sterrett considers theory around socially engaged experience. He writes, "The repudiation of the art object in the production of socially engaged aesthetic experience has been central to these theoretical efforts. But while it seems to occupy a generally agreed upon point of exclusion, the object returns insistently to the scene of both practical and theoretical consideration.," (Sterrett 104). The presence of the object-trophy is key to the success of this project, as it is the physical locus within which the exchange and interaction of the project is embodied. Without a physical object, there would be no exchange, and by extension, no artwork.

With *This Is My Day Job* I significantly expanded my pool of participants. Functioning as a coffee shop, this project asked participants to create a drawing in exchange for a cup of coffee (Figure 2). While this may seem like a simple enough trade, each participant is informed that upon completion of their drawing,

and their receipt of the coffee, the drawing is completely mine, which means I can sell it, destroy it, or claim it as my own. Importantly, I could refuse the drawing if I deemed it not to my liking, and they would not receive coffee.

I performed the coffee shop in Greensboro, North Carolina, as well as in Minneapolis, MN as part of a socially engaged art festival. To fund my plane ticket, and all the supplies associated with running a coffee shop, I held an online fundraising campaign. Online fundraisers often promise donors a “gift” upon successful funding of the project. For my project, anyone who donated at least \$10 to the campaign was promised a drawing that would be made at the coffee shop. Thus, the project had its own self-contained financial system, with the exchange involving three parties: me, the participants, and the funders.

Two main concepts motivated the creation of this exchange. I had worked several service jobs to support my artistic practice, and had experienced the expenditure of both physical and emotional labor for very little pay. I wanted to turn this experience on its head essentially by running my own coffee shop. The ironic title *This Is My Day Job* implies that I am so busy running this establishment that I do not have time to make art, and therefore have to have others make art for me in exchange for my goods. I am also exploring what exactly constitutes “art” in this scenario. Drawings are traditionally understood to be art, but the entire context of the experience is an aesthetic one as well. This leads me to my second motivation, an examination of artistic labor. I wanted to know how much worth participants were willing to place on their own original

expression of creativity. In some rough sense, I also wanted to make a point that American society undervalues artists, as many would be lucky to get even a cup of coffee for their work. However I got a completely different reaction than what I expected. Rather than becoming angry at the implied devaluation of their work, most participants seemed quite happy to be part of the exchange. I talked to both artists and non-artists, and when I asked whether this was a fair trade, many of the responses I received were a variation of “yes, it is, because it is providing me with an experience.” Thus, the experience which they valued was their participation in and aesthetic experience of my artwork.

During the first iteration of the coffee shop, I was both the barista and the art critic. Though rejection was possible, I did not reject any work. However, the potential for rejection was part of the requirements that participants agreed to, and I knew that I needed help. For the coffee shop’s final run, I collaborated with Sheena Rose, a fellow graduate student and an artist who has many personas, including The Serious Art Critic (Figure 3). Before redeeming their coffees, participants first had to present their artwork to her, and she would sometimes spend up to 20 minutes talking to individuals, sending them back several times before accepting a piece. What seemed like the potential for rejection turned into a personalized portfolio review, adding depth and layers to the exchange. The Serious Art Critic’s presence was so integral to this trade, that I again just became a simple barista.

After *This Is My Day Job*, I was motivated to continue exploring situations in which exchange facilitates dialogue. During the end of my first year in graduate school, I had an opportunity to assist one of my professors, Sheryl Oring, with her ongoing participatory project, *I Wish To Say*. This experience had an effect on my own practice, as Oring's project was political in nature and included elements of civic engagement. For the past 12 years, she has taken dictation from members of the public on a manual typewriter, as the participants composed letters to the president. In the spring of 2016 we took 50 UNCG undergraduates to New York to serve as typists and volunteers as the public composed letters to the presidential candidates (Figure 5). I was personally very invested in the outcome of the election, and found the project's willingness to engage with difficult issues, as well as the breadth of the participants' experience, particularly refreshing. This experience partially inspired me to create *Privilege Coffee*.

Privilege Coffee is a coffee shop where patrons trade their privilege for coffee. I had the election on my mind and was devising a proposal for the Art in Odd Places festival in Orlando, Florida, the theme of which for 2016 was "play." I was attempting to create a playful scenario of exchange about the serious topic of privilege, and was modeling my proposal off the coffee exchange of *This Is My Day Job*. The topic of privilege was on my mind because of the controversy surrounding the racist undertones of the Trump campaign, as well as the dialogue sparked by groups like Black Lives Matter. I was also completely

baffled at the defensiveness of white people when even the idea of systemic racism or privilege was brought up. It seemed to me that the concept of societal privilege, in which by virtue of one's birth or position in life one has systemic advantages over other people, was foreign to many individuals. In the context of the hateful rhetoric of the Trump campaign, this lack of understanding and awareness posed a significant threat, which, as we saw later, was unfortunately realized. I thus attempted to orchestrate a situation in which discussion of the difficult and multifaceted concept of privilege would be possible.

Privilege Coffee operated on the same idea as *This Is My Day Job*: coffee is something that people want, and to receive it they are willing to perform an action (in the first case, drawing), or emotional labor, such as reflecting on their own privilege. This proved to be true, as to date over 130 people have participated. In this case, an environment was created in which conversation could happen over coffee in a participatory setting. The project includes a specific structure in order to facilitate conversation. In the first version of the project, participants are invited to pick privileges out of a collection of colorful cards (Figures 6,7) which list 12 different privileges: white, male, Christian, middle/upper class, able-bodied, neurotypical (no mental health issues or disabilities), cisgender (not transgender), happy childhood, thin, American citizen, gender-conforming (appearing like a typical man or woman), and heterosexual. I chose these privilege because I believe that they are primary advantages which lead to other privileges. For instance, being upper-middle class and white can

lead to the privilege of higher education. I was also paying attention to relevant current events - for instance, with all of Trump's rhetoric about building a wall, the privilege of being an American citizen seemed especially pertinent. Also, I wanted to address major social categories such as class, gender, religion, health, and sexuality. I limited it to 12 categories in order to keep the selection from becoming so overwhelming that conversation would be hindered.

After participants pick out their privileges, they are served coffee based on a price chart: five or fewer privileges earns a small, 12 ounce cup of coffee; 6-9 privileges earns a medium, 16 ounce cup; 10-12 privileges earns a large, 20 ounce cup. I made an intentional decision to reward participants with more privilege with more coffee, because I wanted to add a level of criticality to the exchange. By granting more perks for more privilege, the exchange mirrors actual life, in which those with more privilege often have access to more advantages. For this reason, I chose not to go the ameliorative route of rewarding those with less privilege with more coffee. After participants received their coffee, they were asked to deposit the card with the privilege which made their life the easiest into the "tip jar." The privilege which was picked the most often was "able-bodied," and a number of participants stated that this is something that they had taken for granted (figure 9).

In another, less successful version of the project, I replaced the cards with a lottery wheel, meant to represent "the birth lottery" in which the situation one is born into is a matter of chance. Participants won privilege based on what

the spinner wheel landed on, and then decided whether it would be a small, medium, or large advantage. For instance, a person who is already white might land on the white category, and could therefore speak from experience. However, participants had a hard time imagining what it would be like to not have that privilege. In another situation, someone who was a woman could land on the male privilege, and could attempt to imagine how her life would be different if she were a man. While this approach was meant to generate empathy by encouraging coffee shop patrons to imagine what it would be like to have a certain privilege or lack thereof, the design rendered less in-depth conversations. Part of this was due to the fact that participants were asked to examine hypothetical situations, rather than their own lives. In the original version, having to identify one's own privilege requires a degree of self-examination, the sharing of which can be an intimate act.

The conversations I had were surprising and informative. I took great care to not present any judgment, and focused on asking questions rather than "educating" the participants in any manner, as their own lived experience was more enlightening than anything I could say to them. However, the project had a clear agenda presented through its structure. According to Ted Purves, "Confrontational generosity, the possibility of detournement through the tactical use of gifts, or the democratic gesture or redistributing your own privileges as an artist or audience or community - all of these can be read in light of critical exchange," (Purves 2). While I was the facilitator of the exchange, I attempted to

redistribute my privileges as an artist by focusing on the words and ideas of the participants.

Some of these exchanges proved to be emotional, as the coffee shop in Art in Odd Places in Orlando took place right after the election. One patron focused on her conservative acquaintance's lack of self-awareness, and ended up crying. Throughout my dialogues, coffee shop patrons would begin by speaking about their privileges, but inadvertently would end up revealing their hardships. For instance, a woman who worked with transgender teens of color was extremely aware of the concept of privilege and her own whiteness. However, about 20 minutes into our conversation, she revealed that though she is now a mental health professional, her family considers her profession a complete joke and she had to pay for her own therapist when she was fifteen years old because her parents did not think her mental health was important. Some participants sat down with little awareness of privilege, but with the willingness to engage. I found that conversations with these people were the most helpful for both them and me. I realize that the people who are completely defensive about the idea of privilege wouldn't engage with me. However, the fact that I reached those who were willing to engage and think about these ideas was a successful measure of the project.

At the beginning of this graduate program, I was unsure how my role as an artist could be a facilitator of shared knowledge and dialogue with others. I knew that I did not want solely to make objects in solitude and have my only link

to an audience be in the form of an exhibit. By creating structures for exchange and participation that include the making of objects as an intrinsic part of each project, I created work that fulfills my desire to learn about myself through learning about others. Thereby, I believe I helped myself become more fully human, as I engaged empathetically with other people and caused them to experience empathy as well. *Trophies for Artists*, *This Is My Day Job*, and *Privilege Coffee* gave me the opportunity to have meaningful conversations as part of my art-making.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Finkelpearl, Tom. *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. Print.
- Fowle, Kate, and Lars Bang Larsen. "Lunch Hour: Art, Community, Administered Space and Unproductive Activity." *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art*. Ed. Ted Purves. Albany: State U of New York, 2014. 39-48. Print.
- Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: U of California, 2014. Print.
- Purves, Ted. "Candies in Endless Supply: From Generosity to Critical Exchange." *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art*. Ed. Ted Purves. Albany: State U of New York, 2014. 1-6. Print.
- Sterrett, Edward. "Towards a Sociability of Objects." *Activating Democracy: The "I Wish to Say" Project*. Ed. Sheryl Oring. Bristol: Intellect, 2016. 103-10. Print.

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Figure 1. Trophy for Matthew Hayes

Figure 2. *This Is My Day Job*, Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016

Figure 3. Sheena Rose As The Serious Art Critic, *This Is My Day Job*,
Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016

Figure 4. A drawing made as part of the coffee exchange, *This Is My Day
Job*, Performance, Minneapolis, MN 2016

Figure 5. Sheryl Oring, *I Wish To Say*, Performance, New York, NY, 2016

Figure 6. Detail, *Privilege Coffee*, Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016

Figure 7. *Privilege Coffee*, Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016

Figure 8. *Privilege Coffee*, Performance, Orlando, FL, 2016



Figure 1. *Trophy for Matthew Hayes*
Artist's media: interdisciplinary media
What Julia Caston drank: latte smoothie
Conversation: speaking in tongues
Location: Tate Street Coffee, Greensboro, North Carolina,
36.0684° N, 79.8058° W
Materials: clay, imitation moss
2016



Figure 2. *This Is My Day Job*, Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016



Figure 3. Sheena Rose As The Serious Art Critic. *This Is My Day Job*, Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016

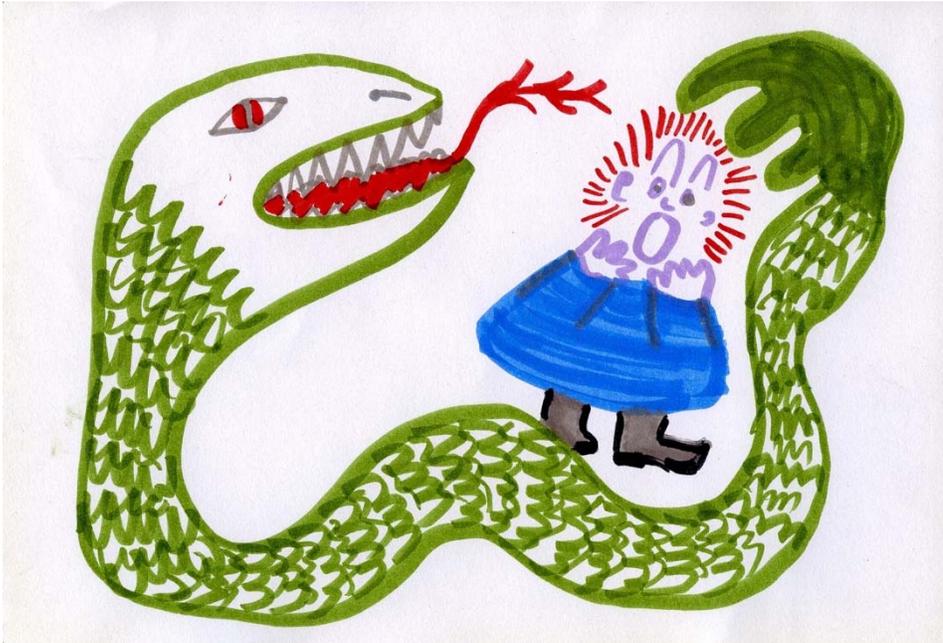


Figure 4. A Drawing Made as Part of the Coffee Exchange. *This Is My Day Job*, Performance, Minneapolis, MN 2016



Figure 5. Sheryl Oring, *I Wish To Say*, Performance, New York, NY, 2016



Figure 6. Detail, *Privilege Coffee, Performance*, Greensboro, NC, 2016



Figure 7. *Privilege Coffee, Performance, Greensboro, NC, 2016*



Figure 8. *Privilege Coffee, Performance*, Orlando, FL, 2016