

CHEAP / WORTH

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## ABSTRACT

CHEAP/WORTH

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The idea of “cheap” is fascinating in its contradictions and misdirection. Cheap food, cheap clothes, cheap resources... “cheap” as a descriptor under neoliberal capitalism is always a signifier of a lie. Whether it be in stolen wages or environmental destruction, there are always hidden costs required to be cheap. The drive for cheap connects labor to land through continuous efforts to reduce costs and increase profits. At the height of the Confederacy, the South had the second largest economy in the world and that economy was entirely built on stolen land, stolen labor, stolen lives and vast environmental destruction. Economies built on slavery and environmental degradation require enormous propaganda campaigns to maintain the concept of cheap. Even in a post-slavery South, the concept of cheap and the supporting propaganda dictate our current economy and government. This is the politics of extraction and disposability. The entire history of the colonized south is encapsulated in the politics of extraction and disposability. To assert alternative systems of value that defy these politics is a small but revolutionary act. From the studio to the streets, I have spent my life enacting these small rebellions. In my studio work I use formalism and aesthetics as tools of subversion of capitalist value systems. Knowing that each one on its own is not enough to create monumental system changes I act in faith that a seed planted, a lie unlearned, a moment of grace and belonging, all have the potential of transformation.

## INTRODUCTION

CHEAP/WORTH consists of four exercises: *Adventures in Advertising*, *Penny Stocks*, *Aggregate Demand*, and *Currency Exchange*. The idea of “cheap” is fascinating in its contradictions and misdirection. Cheap food, cheap clothes, cheap resources... “cheap” as a descriptor under neoliberal capitalism is a signifier of a lie. Whether it be in stolen wages or environmental destruction, there are always hidden costs required to be cheap. The drive for cheap connects labor to land through continuous efforts to reduce costs and increase profits. The consequence of both the commodification of labor and land is a belief system that preaches an image of the working class that is undeserving of wealth created from their labor. WORTH stands in contradiction to commodification. Autonomous demarcation, identification and creation of worth are acts of system rebellions. With the ability to be determined both by the individual and the collective, WORTH can be democratic and participatory, regenerative and spontaneous, and can exist whole life cycles outside of markets and speculation. CHEAP operates as a container for the material used, working class identity, and the visibility of labor both as an action and a movement. WORTH is the motivation, a desired outcome and a necessary ingredient to building new within the shell of the old.

## ADVENTURES IN ADVERTISING

*Adventures in Advertising* operates as the title piece of my thesis. It is two 8ft by 4ft fabric banners depicting a pastel and sharpie drawing with the show title words CHEAP and WORTH printed on each. This drawing is a composite of 4 different photos I took on a road trip this winter to see Spiral Jetty, Sun Tunnels and Double Negative. Before this trip I had never driven west of Louisiana. Experiencing the landscapes of Kansas, Nevada and Utah expanded my visual understanding of rural spaces. Traversing these areas, I meditated on the concept of cheap as a signifier of invisible labor and questioned the capacity of our current economic and governmental structures to respond to the needs of

the communities that dotted the landscape. I was consumed by the vastness while observing the physical distance between neighbors and between homes and necessary resources, like grocery stores, gas stations and medical centers.

I took pictures anytime dwellings emerged from the land. These included small communities that formed around towering grain silos, RV and converted vehicle compounds, and the solitary rancher's home. Each space documented a purposeful attachment to the land itself and of the time period in which they emerged. I started to think about the commonalities between the ruralness of the South and these spaces we passed through. As I reflected on the art pieces we selected as our destinations, my thoughts focused on the idea of marking and mark making. From here I started to think about how rural communities consistently mark the landscape in ways that are just not possible in the confines of urban centers. We saw broken cars rusting into fields, structures created by cannibalizing old ones, hand-made signs, hand-painted water tanks, yard art made of the scraps; each an autonomous act defying or complementing the reality of the space in which they were located. These autonomous acts can be found in some form within urban spaces—like graffiti and yard decorations—but they do not achieve the same visual impact due to limitations of a constructed landscape.

The home at the center of my piece, exaggerated by the play with perspective I achieved through the combination of multiple photos, is the inspiration behind this piece. This bright blue home was constructed out of at least 3 different trailers and was the only structure in the landscape for miles in all directions. How we adorn our homes both inside and out operate as signifiers. These signifiers point to the stories we want people to create about us and stories we desire to tell ourselves. Operating within the bounds of American Dream propaganda, the aesthetic signifiers of home are designed to tell stories of wealth, education, status, taste and intellect to both the occupants of the home and to those who visit or pass by. The bright blue adornment of this home stood in direct contrast to these signifiers. This aesthetic choice for the outside of a lone structure, only accessible by dirt road and happenstance, is for the occupants and expresses a value not measured by the rules of middle- and upper-class virtue signaling. Taken by both the image of this home and its metaphorical capacity, I needed to draw it. When I started

on this drawing, I knew I wanted to visually describe the contrast between the bright blue painted exterior contrasted with the vastness of the landscape surrounding this home. The drawing's scale was integral to the concept. It was in conversations with my committee where the connection between the scale I was working on and billboards emerged. From the hand-painted "Jesus Saves" signs to the multimillion-dollar corporate spectacle, this connection led me to think about the function of billboards that range from declarations to marketing. I became interested in exploiting the ways in which advertisement can act as propaganda. With the recreation of the drawing through commercially produced banners, Adventures in Advertising became an exercise in advertisement that is detached from its market goals. The questions I am posing in this work is what is marketing beyond a product, beyond exchange and how can this tool be used in place of manipulation designed to affect purchasing behaviors, to assert anti-capitalist value propositions designed to affect behaviors of observation and consideration?

## PENNY STOCKS

Penny Stocks are the first forms you encounter when you enter the space in the gallery holding my work. Penny Stocks is constructed from the materials I had around me: Amazon boxes, spackle, paint and holographic glitter from previous projects. Each form starts with a foundation that is constructed by gluing cardboard pieces. Once the foundation is constructed, I work at a speed where the final form is the result of in-the-moment reactions rather than a predetermined goal. As someone deeply impacted by the consequences of activism to stop mountaintop removal, the image of mountains is as consistent in my work as they were consistent in my landscape of my childhood. Consuming the variety of mountain ranges that span the states we travelled west through this winter was intoxicating and delightfully overwhelming. In between gawking at them and taking an obnoxious number of pictures of them, I would draw them in my brain. Imaginary ink drawing animations played in my mind when I was not driving. The forms that Penny Stocks take is the result of this collaboration between my imagination and my

memory. These pieces started as an excuse to give my hands something to do as I tried to make sense of what was going to become my thesis.

Skinning the forms with glitter is intended to complicate the objects' association with high and low craft. I often think of the giant craft fairs held at my elementary school in Kentucky, a loud joyous room lined with women makers participating in a type of material exchange free from markets and craft hierarchies. With the emphasis on trade and celebration of whatever items lined those tables, these events were magical in their own autonomous acts of demarcating and communicating worth. They created temporary closed circuit economic exchanges that were open to any maker who could borrow a table and in so doing produced collective exchanges in pride and possibilities. They were the trading floors of penny stock appropriations.

The term "penny stocks" comes from the saying trading pennies on the dollar and is used to describe the Security Exchange Act designation of stocks purchased for less than \$5 dollars. These prices create accessible entry points for individuals with less capital and because of this, penny stocks are seen as denigrators in the market. The consequences of this low-class association and mass accessibility is a market that is under regulated and ripe for fraud. The most common fraud practice with these stocks is called pump-and-dump. Pump-and-dump is where large quantities of stocks are purchased at very low prices and their value is raised in the eyes of the market through "misleading positive statements and artificial inflation" (Wikipedia) only to be sold *en mass* once the value of the stocks are higher than the purchase price. Side stepping the conversation on how the secondary art market is profoundly committed to ideas underlining pump-and-dump, what draws me to these stocks as an intellectual exercise is the concept of the pump. Pump-and-dump is considered deceitful, fraudulent, and inevitable. But when taken out of the context of the market and placed on top of human relational systems, the action of pumping could be tied to the actions demanded in the common expression of 'leaving a place better than you found it'. 'Leaving a place better than you found it' and 'a job worth doing is a job worth doing well' were two of my Kentucky grandmother's favorite life sayings. Where the last one is a lesson in the dignity of labor and craft, leave a place better than you found it is an action of investment and wealth creation, wealth that

defines the limitations of market values. The connection between pumping and my work is found in the repetition of labor I rely on to make the work. The labor is an investment, it is an act of rising value of the materials I work with. A value not measured in the market but in the eyes of the viewer, simply through the subconscious communication that happens when care and intention is translated through the evidence of time and work.

Pump-and-dump is considered a crime through the “misleading positive statements and artificial inflation” involved in raising the price of the stock. If we isolate this statement and remove it from the lens of the market, the question for me becomes how would inflation and contrived positive statements of value affect the volatility or stability of our material needs? How would the politics of disposability change if inflation meant the elevation of the collective worth of the working class? Expanding out from there, how could inflation lead to restorative justice and abolition?

## AGGREGATE DEMAND

Residing in the same corridor as Adventures in Advertising is the next piece in my thesis titled Aggregate Demand. According to Investopedia.com aggregate demand is defined as “economic measurement of the total amount of demand for all finished goods and services produced in an economy. Aggregate demand is expressed as the total amount of money exchanged for those goods and services at a specific price level and point in time.” (Kenton) Aggregate demand over time creates the nation's Gross Domestic Product, or GDP. Demand and cost exist in two different realities under capitalism. Demand is a measurement of a defined function within a market, where cost is defined through a selective and abstracted lens created by the market. An economic system built on stolen land, stolen labor and a willfully ignorant belief in infinite resources is incapable of ever producing a true measurement of cost. Appalachia and many parts of the South largely operate as sacrifice zones. A sacrifice zone is “a geographic area that has been permanently impaired by environmental damage or economic

disinvestment.” (Roake). Any measurement of aggregate demand coming out of a sacrifice zone is paradoxical.

In this piece stop-motion videos play on loops from three TV/VCR combos and two TV/DVD combos sitting on plexiglass boxes. The videos are layered photographs taken in central Appalachia, stretching through Tennessee, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia. These photos are both documentation and residue from intentional country drives that have become a significant part of my studio practice. This studio practice marks the difference between intentional country drives and leisure country drives through these conditions:

1. Drives must be more than one hour.
2. Drives must be self-contained.
3. Drives must be self-directed.

The condition of time leads to a drive that is the length of a regular in-studio session of work, which allows for flow state and deep observation. Self-contained means that the drive cannot be tacked onto other non-studio related activities. This keeps intention and focus on the activity itself and not the function of driving. Lastly, self-direction refers to drives that do not rely on maps. The route of the drive develops because of reaction to the environment and desire.

Holding the truth that Appalachia and the South both have a long history of narration without representation, it's important for me to emphasize that the videos are composites of the residue of this travel through the landscape; they are not attempts at articulating a narrative or a particular frame of reference I am placing around the work. To this end, I created these videos by repeating, layering and randomizing the segments. The sound in the videos are site recordings from the locations where the photos were taken. The sounds are then also randomized and play on all five videos at once. The videos themselves were created in Adobe Premiere, burned onto a DVD and transferred to VHS. This both speaks to image banking and the contradiction inherent in the idea of remembering. The iridescent plexiglass boxes are both a vivacious reference to the work of Donald Judd and the authority that form holds in the context of the gallery. I am interested in how the given authority of established art objects

affects the viewing of the Appalachian landscape. The height of the boxes and the large rag rug in front of them indicate that the videos are meant to be experienced sitting down. The position of sitting on a rug on the floor in front of a tv is obviously an indication of nostalgia but I am more interested in creating the conditions for the viewers own nostalgia to be projected into the experience of the work.

## CURRENCY EXCHANGE

The last piece in my thesis, Currency Exchange, is an artist book composed of photos and quotes. Similar to the process I used to make the stop motion videos, the photos in the book are sourced from my drives and have been randomized through a numbering system. The quotes were also selected by randomization through the use of an app that gives you a random number between a self-defined range by shaking your phone. I used the same app to select which photo goes with which quote. The source books range in topics but all have had a profound impact on either my identity as a sculptor or as a Southern anarchist, or both.

Currency Exchange acts as a decentralized manifesto for me. Because of the role they play in both art and liberation movements, I wanted to create a manifesto for many years. But the idea of creating one out of a series of statements I create myself felt self-indulgent in the most unfruitful way. I realized my desire was not to impose my own vision, but rather to reclaim a radical history of the South and rural spaces that has been systematically eroded through misinformation campaigns, collective trauma and classist propaganda. I want to challenge this lack of cultural memory by juxtaposing images with concepts that are too often not associated with the landscape documented in the photos themselves. Also similar to the videos, I am not interested in creating a narrative through the combination of image and text but rather interested in creating the conditions to experience the value propositions rural resistance offers to us. The title Currency Exchange points directly to this system of exchange of text and image and the value produced through association and trade.

The books the quotes were pulled from:

- Organize Your Own: The Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements, Edited by Anthony Romero
- What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia, by Elizabeth Catte
- The Assassination of Fred Hampton, by Jeffrey Haas
- From #BLACKLIVESMATTER to Black Liberation, by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
- Concerning the Spiritual in Art, by Wassily Kandinsky
- Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, by Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin
- Dixie Be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South, by Neal Shirley and Saralee Stafford
- Spontaneity and Organization: On Hierarchy and Domination, by Murray Bookchin
- Anarcho-syndicalism, by Rudolf Rocker
- Socialism, by Michael Newman
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed, by Paulo Freire
- Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement, by Jane McAlevey
- Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power, by Amy Sonnie and James Tracy
- Dispatches Against Displacement, by James Tracy
- To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice, by Jessica Wilkerson
- The Poetics of Space, by Gaston Bachelard
- Take Back the Land, by Max Rameau
- Wobblies & Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History, by Stughton Lynd and Andrej Grubic
- Appalachian Reckoning, edited by Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll
- Life During Wartime: Resisting Counterinsurgency, edited by Kristian Williams, Will Munger and Lara Messersmith-Glavin

- Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art, by Mignon Nixon

## CONCLUSION

Extraction versus mutualism, private control versus collective ownership—every critique of economics is a political statement of value. In the argument over the political framework needed to create a Just Transition<sup>1</sup> or a post-capitalist economy socialism is often seen as a holistic identity rather than a tool. Running parallel to this is an oversimplified and generic understanding of anarchism that suggests anarchy stands opposed to any economic or political system. The result of both is a political left who in large part have created understandings of themselves tied solely to our labor and material needs. While I believe that socialism is a necessary project for economic and societal realignment, socialism is a political project and not a practice. Because of this it lacks the capacity to create outcomes beyond material conditions and therefore cannot contain the full breadth of our humanity. We are more than our labor and our material needs. This is the roses in the labor anthem of “Bread and Roses!” (Thompson). The philosophy, and more importantly, the practice of anarchism is about radically changing how we exist with ourselves, our neighbors, and the environment. Commitments to abolition, community self-determination, mutual aid and solidarity is as critical in this moment as it was in the earliest abolition movements and labor movements. This practice demands not only an expansion of our imaginations around what is possible but a transformation of what is possible. It is defiance through the subversion of what is value within a system that rewards extraction and domination. CHEAP/WORTH is four exercises in subversion, making this work as much about self and social reflection, as it is object-based propaganda.

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<sup>1</sup> Just Transition is a framework developed by the trade union movement to encompass a range of social interventions needed to secure workers' rights and livelihoods when economies are shifting to sustainable production, primarily combating climate change and protecting biodiversity.

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