

No Longer, Not Yet

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Introduction

Thoughts on an Unfinished Project

A possible initial reaction when confronted with an unfinished project is the recognition of failure. Such an object hints toward a final form and in this hint lays bare its inability to reach that end. When viewed with the quick haste that is so natural to the modern day pace of life it is easy to pass over these stunted things as they are understood as not yet worthy of contemplation. Despite this lowly status, unfinished projects have at times succeeded in gaining recognition. Although much of his fiction is incomplete, Kafka's writings remain among the most influential in Western literature. Similarly, Twain spent 20 years creating three unresolved versions of his novel *The Mysterious Stranger*. And Gaudi's *Sagrada Familia* is still being built 82 years after his death, based on reconstructed versions of salvaged plans.

Turning attention from well-known historic figures to today's everyday makers, unfinished projects have become topic for personal blogs and reflect the growing public interest in craft and the hand made. Resonant in these endeavors is the investment of manual work, time, and dedication. They pose the question; in a consumer society can time still be made to engage in slow and steady processes undirected toward monetary gain? Failing to perform the roll of a consumable object, an unfinished project presents itself as free-floating work, work for its own sake. In this technological age, these stunted items

appear extravagantly inefficient in terms of time and labor, offering nothing more than a partial object whose only value resides in the work that's been put into it.

Exploring the unfinished project in three essays, this text reflects my efforts to valorize process over product and experience over end result.

“Evidence of Making”, explores our changing role from one of production to consumption and offers the unfinished as subtle forms of resistance, providing evidence of making within commodity culture where it is unnecessary and inconvenient to do so. “On Time” looks at the inconsistent nature of an unfinished project in relation to modern ideals concerning time in which the current technological climate demands that every minute be well spent and accurately accounted for. “In the Middle” views the unfinished project as a radical object that refuses to support a conclusive interpretation and in doing so, resists traditional measurements of achievement, production and success. In presenting these varied areas, where the act of creating is brought to a standstill or moves at a crawl, as a space in which to question the relentless pace of everyday life, my work opts for a way of approaching experience beyond the linear structure of progress.

Have you ever tried to make something?

Vogue Pattern # 1462

My interest in the unfinished sewing project was not immediate. Other objects had appeared on the ledge at the bottom of the stairway provoking a more instant reaction, usually based on their usefulness to me; paper-towel dispenser-yes, old tennis shoes-definitely not, towel rack-yes, coffee mugs-plenty of those, mysterious VHS tapes-no. It was not until I walked out of my apartment building that the significance of the object struck me. As an artist, under pressure to finish work, the incomplete project was something I could relate to. Invested in ideas of craft and the hand-made, I realized that my interest in it lay in my own experiences of making. I was touched with this failed attempt by someone who might share some of my own values for patient and time-consuming processes. I went back to collect the pile from the ledge.

Had it been finished, Vogue Pattern #1462 would have been a woman's coat, size 14. The pattern specs boasted of its membership to the fashion line, Paris Original, a designation that seemed appropriate considering the odd fabric. As a whole the woven material took on a psychedelic green mess but studied individually, each yarn was discernable; bright green wound with black, avocado green, orange with intertwining brown. As I studied the mossy fabric shapes and paper pattern pieces, I considered all the choices made and hands passed through in order for the pile to end up on the ledge at the bottom of the stairway. I thought of the immense span of this object, from the origin of the fibers and the design of the pattern to the final decision of

my neighbor not to finish the sewing project but to abandon her invested time, leaving it to chance that someone else, like myself, might take on the task.

Evidence of Making

The act of making is on a continuous drift away from the grasp of common knowledge. Throughout the unfolding history of our collaboration with the machine, Western culture has experienced periodic revivals of the slow and thorough process of hand production from The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and then America to the current day resurgence of craft. The major concerns of these revivals reflect a desire to reverse a feeling of alienation from our own labor, a belief in quality over quantity, and an insistence on human value. Today's unfinished projects when viewed as a part of this larger history, point to these concerns and lend themselves as evidence of making within today's commodity culture where it is neither necessary or convenient to do so. In the face of mass production, creating our own objects is a subtle act of resistance. The inability to reach completion does not erase the participation in this process, but amplifies the real difficulties of engaging in creative endeavors and embracing skills we are becoming disconnected from through modern technology.

Five hundred thousand years, this is the approximate age attributed to the first simple stone tools. In trying to understand the everyday attempts at creation reflected in unfinished projects, the ubiquity of the opposable thumb and its near mythic status come to mind. From an evolutionary perspective, using our hands to turn raw materials into goods is our unique inheritance.

Anthropological studies have come a long way in linking tool use to human development and suggest a more complex relationship than once was thought. “It is now clear that tools antedate [man], and that their use by pre-human primates gave rise to Homo sapiens.”¹ This discovery corrects the view that humankind’s relationship to the environment, once considered as an inherent ability to perform mastery over nature was actually a reciprocal exchange in which “behavior and structure form an interacting complex with each change in one affecting the other.”² In other words, the human brain makes the human way of life possible because it is the result of that way of life. Thus, tools and manufactured objects have performed the role of extensions of the body into the world, facilitating ways of knowing it. It’s sobering to think of our current status as something not intrinsic to us, but requiring of the body the kind of hard work that happens when fueled by necessity and rewarded by survival.

The interdependence of this relationship, tool to man and vice versa, is something I am familiar with. My most treasured tool is one that was handed down by a mentor and possibly was handed down to him. He used it until it could offer no more gain and then relinquished it so as to provide me that same knowledge. I struggled through many unsuccessful efforts until the tool and I could cooperate, leaving behind a trail of practice attempts. This connection between the hand and the brain is a modern phenomena as well as an evolutionary one. There is an all-consuming type of learning that happens

¹ Sherwood L. Washburn, “Tools and Human Evolution.” Scientific American 203.3 (1960) 62.

² Washburn 63.

through the hands and they are no longer separate but an extension of the mind, connecting brain to body entirely. Anyone who has lost themselves in a project, oblivious to their surroundings for a prolonged period of time, will say as much. In this respect, these discarded attempts at creating something by hand seem to be part of this inheritance. So much so that I wonder why I don't see an abundance of unfinished projects littered across the landscape.

But modernity has meant to some degree, a separation of making from the everyday realm. The creation of objects both aesthetic and functional, once existing within the space we inhabit, has been relegated to studios, factories, and industrial parks. With the development of the global economy production has undergone a further removal and is trucked across borders and shipped overseas. In its totalizing application, mass production has rendered creative experiences foreign to many people within the public sphere, while fragmenting it and forcing it on individuals we will never see, but who's anonymous products we will consume. This estrangement from labor has resulted in a protection from the failures inherent in the process of making. An unfinished project, when seen as a rarity or deemed as a failure, is a reflection of this relationship and the containment of unsuccessful attempts, failed prototypes, mistakes, and mishaps within these zones of production.

Late-19th Century Europe saw the beginning of The Arts and Crafts Movement, one of the earliest reactions against the machine made products of the industrial age. John Ruskin, a major influence to this movement, spoke against the dangers in the industrial trend toward the specialization of labor,

reducing the individual's knowledge "so that all the little pieces of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail."³ Inspiring artists, craftsmen and worker's of the time, he spoke on valuing the experience of the process rather than being a producer of perfection. The California College of the Arts, for which I am writing this MFA thesis is an existing monument to this craftsman ideal and the movement's desire to safeguard long held traditions in craft. My own work is, in its own way, a study of imperfection. I've come to understand unfinished projects as failing to uphold ideals that have become connected to capitalism and industry. Flawed in their hand-made partiality, these objects are the antithesis of the perfection that modern production has made possible. Heralded and thought to be a benefit of the specialization of labor, these possibilities were, for Ruskin, the heart of their evil.

Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause; but out comes the whole majesty of him also.⁴

For him as for me, the goal was not to make perfect things but to engage in making in general and to embrace everything within that experience. Working in my studio, with familiar tools and materials, I became grounded in

³John Ruskin, "The Nature of Gothic," The Genius of John Ruskin: Selections from his Writings, ed. John D. Rosenberg (London: U of Virginia P, 1998) 180.

⁴Ruskin 178.

concentration. In those windows of time, when my mind and hands worked together in seamless coordination, I existed on my own terms.

As we find ourselves in a similar situation to our ancestors of early industrialism, we are expressing the same need for connection beyond that provided by fragmented production and passive consumption. In researching the interest in craft practices among today's makers I came across several blog entries on the topic of unfinished projects. These entries, like the following, represent attempts of the everyday person to fulfill a need to be an active part of meaningful production:

I wonder if I should give up on this all together and throw all the projects out the window. I should just let them go but there's something about wanting to finish them that appeals to me, like a reason TO BE. Like a life meaning behind them, when the only meaning these little projects have is probably holding me back from doing important things.⁵

The frustration is poignant in this entry as it expresses a real struggle in the negotiation between the investment of time toward personal endeavors and the push to utilize time toward "important things", or that which fall in line with endeavors that can be measured in capital gain. "The aesthetics of 'past times', commodified in the shops of the same name, have enjoyed a revival, as have traditional domestic practices, such as quilting."⁶ The revalorization of such

⁵Logta65, "I Wonder," [Weblog Entry], 43Things: Finish My Unfinished Projects, 24 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.43things.com/things/view/44293/finish-my-unfinished-projects>>.

⁶ Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig, *Slow Living* (New York: Berg, 2006) 8.

creative practices illustrate that individuals are seeking ways to cope with the flux of contemporary existence.

A modern thinker of cultural production, Michel de Certeau writes with the particular interest in the everyday and the production of meaning that happens within it, “the approach to culture begins when the ordinary man becomes the narrator, when it is he who defines the common place of discourse and the anonymous space of its development.”⁷ I have come to think of these blog entries in regards to de Certeau’s words. A blog is precisely the narration of the ordinary individual, allowing the insertion of that voice into the anonymous space of the Internet, a space that has increasingly become the common place of discourse. De Certeau describes the ordinary individual as one who “appears with the insignia of a general misfortune of which he makes sport.”⁸

I’ve known for a very long time that I have a problem with ‘finishing’ things. Often it’s because my vision keeps moving forward as I approach it—I’m always seeing how much better the thing could be than what I’ve done so far.⁹

Making sport of an inability to carry something through to the end, these publicly posted thoughts, musings and confessions offer a look at our ideal through the perspective of failed achievement. Aware that unfinished projects are not

⁷ Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (London: U of California Press, 1984) 5.

⁸ De Certeau 5.

⁹ Phillip J. Eby, “Death in a Pile of Unfinished Projects.” [Weblog Post] DirtSimple.org, 16 March. 2006. <<http://dirtSimple.org/2006/03/death-in-a-Pile-of-Unfinished-Projects.html>>.

considered by society as something to be proud of, these semi-anonymous authors are freely and perhaps defiantly admitting their shortcomings.

Attempting to create objects by hand within today's convenience driven culture when we can quickly and easily obtain them through purchase speaks to the value of the creative experience. Surrounded by commodities that have been made effortless and affordable through modern production, making something by hand whether decorative or functional is unnecessary. Rose Slivka's 1970 article "Affirmation: The American Craftsman" illustrates the impetus of this trend, "In a society and a value system dominated by impersonal corporate structure and depersonalized technological function, modern craftsmanship is an affirmation of hand skills as human value."¹⁰ In our product driven culture it is all too often that the reward is equated with the end result. These examples of continued engagement in creative processes suggest that participation in such a process offers more satisfaction than can be undone by falling short of a final product.

An evident tension has emerged between our growing role focused around acts of consumption, and an increasing divergence from a past rooted in production. De Certeau describes consumers as,

Unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality. They trace indeterminate trajectories that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move. They are sentences that remain

¹⁰ Rose Slivka, "Affirmation: The American Craftsman," Craft Horizons 30 (1970): 10-11.

unpredictable within the space ordered by the organizing techniques of systems.¹¹

Rather than an all out surrender or a nostalgic retreat to simpler times, negotiation of the everyday by a public deemed as consumers illustrates a kind of accidental resistance. Appropriating the spaces that are a result of our technological achievements, individuals are inserting their hand-made failures within a system developed out of industrial production. Using this technological social structure to parade the shortcomings represented by unfinished projects subverts ideals geared towards consumption. These interruptions in the usual economic order appear to de Certeau as the “murmuring of everyday practices” that “far from being a local, and thus classifiable, revolt, it is a common and silent, almost sheep like subversion-our own.”¹²

¹¹ De Certeau 34.

¹² De Certeau 200.

Did it take a long time?

Slowness

I've never done anything in a quick way. I move at my own pace, one that holds on to skepticism and holds out for certainty. These observations come not from me but my mother, the one who knows me the best, who cares to treat even the most mundane of my personal attributes as a certain kind of amazing that only I am capable of. My mother knows about slowness. She has something to compare it to. Five years after me, with lightning speed, came my brother. He couldn't wait for his body to align properly with hers, so arms straight out in front-superman style, he shot straight out into the world. This urgent entrance into life has always served as a means of comparison to my own cautious apprehension of it and vice versa.

Never quick to fully embrace new things, I've always had difficulty orienting myself to the latest trend, gadget, or technology. It could be confused with a conscientious refusal to modernize but I've never been that rebellious. It's more likely that it just takes me longer to arrive at these things. This explains my affinity for traditional craft skills, specifically metalsmithing. Of course I believe that preserving tradition is important but at the very heart of the matter, it's far less political. With all of the modes of technological advancement, many things come and go but the process by which metal is transformed was perfected thousands of years ago and hasn't changed much since.

In finding the pattern I compared my own trade to that of my neighbor's. And in doing so compared my nature to hers. I imagined her to be comfortable with the speed of the sewing machine, taking solace in the ability to release the pedal if the needle went too fast. Sympathetic to the length of time the project had existed in its incomplete state, this woman had deepened my already great respect for duration. There was a humble poetry in the maturity of the coat pattern and the passing years it had seen. How long does it take to sew a coat? How long does it take to decide you're not going to finish sewing a coat? How long does it take to drive to the store and buy a coat?

On Time

Our everyday experiences unfold within a culture that places emphasis on a type of progress that requires the efficient use of time toward productive activity. This situation has become polarized by technology's ability to maximize production while at the same time providing meticulous methods of measuring time. In this way, a 24 hr day has been objectified and parceled into smaller and smaller fragments, leaving little space for prolonged experience. Paradoxically, we have come to rely on methods of saving what precious little time we have, investing in devices to make tasks go by faster, facilitating the cycle to no end. I have never been able to acclimate to these demands yet I have never been able to shake loose of them. A handmade unfinished project mirrors the incompatibility sometimes felt between my own speed and that of the exterior world. They have an out of sink quality, admirable in a strange ability to achieve a kind of resistance to the flow of modernity. Their state of pause along this assumed journey to completion provides breathing space in which to think about how we have come to conceptualize time.

Our efforts in understanding time through measurement have long been translated through materiality. In this way the qualitative perception of duration has been objectified by a conversion into tangible quantities. An early Roman ritual illustrates an example of this practice:

Each year, on September 15, the Dies Natalis of the Temple of the Capitoline Jupiter, a Roman state official would hammer a nail into the temple wall. This act marked time, in the passive sense of the term; it served to record each passing year like a prisoner's scratching on the wall of a cell. The ritual marked time in a more active sense as well. The nailing was an act of human inscription, interrupting the flow of time, fixing it for an instant, and marking it as a human phenomenon. Because of the ritual, time is no longer perceivable solely as some external force requiring submission, it is now subject, as well, to human deed and intention. The nail, after all, did more than mark time; it memorialized an act of human construction.¹³

As we have become more sophisticated in our use of technology, the materiality of the nail embedded in the wall, marking passing years, has been converted into progressively smaller units of measurement. Each increment of time has been succeeded by a more accurate counterpart and the materiality of the nail has long since been replaced with that of the atom. Since 1967, the International System of Units (SI) has defined the second as, "the duration of 9,192,631,770 cycles of radiation corresponding to the transition between two energy levels of the ground state of the caesium-133 atom."¹⁴ Accuracy has been distilled into its most minute measurement leaving nothing unaccounted for.

This type of heightened awareness of time, in a progress-oriented culture is inseparable from a notion of efficiency. Defined in Webster's dictionary as "1: the quality or degree of being efficient, 2a: efficient operation, b (1) effective operation as measured by a comparison of production with cost (as in energy,

¹³ Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Slip in Time Saves Nine: Prestigious Origins Again," Chronotypes: The Construction of Time, ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991) 67.

¹⁴ "Atomic Clock." Wikipedia. 29 March. 2009. Wikimedia Foundation. 1 April. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/Atomic_clock>.

time, and money)”¹⁵, being efficient introduces the prospect of squandering time foolishly and explains our constant efforts to live through experiences as fast as possible. And so we find ourselves with an intense addiction to immediacy wherein, “the appeal of speed –its valorization if not its achievement- has become a defining feature of contemporary culture, in which speed ‘intensifiers’ like channel-zapping TV remotes, speed dialing and sound bites are part of everyday experience.”¹⁶ When considered in this shadow of technologically aided progress, making something by hand is irresponsibly time consuming. The utilization of one’s own manual labor when compounded with an inability to finish the endeavor becomes negligently inefficient as well.

It’s sometimes hard to remember that this demand for immediacy has not always governed individual experience. Paul Valery addresses the changing pace of time evidenced in the disappearance of a craftsman ideal, “[t]his patient process of nature, was once imitated by men,” however, “all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is passed in which time did not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated.” (qtd. in Benjamin 83).¹⁷ Replacing sustained production, industry has resulted in the break up of the process of creation for the sake of cost and efficiency, causing our attention to become increasingly condensed in focus.

¹⁵ “Efficiency,” Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. 1995.

¹⁶ Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig, Slow Living (New York: Berg, 2006) 39.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000) 83.

Time in the United States has become a commodity, but only present time. The past is useless, the future of interest only as a potentially better present. The pre-industrial sense of continuity with the past has been contracted into a narrow present.¹⁸

Hand making takes steps to undo this immediacy and reveals an attention towards both the present as well as history. By engaging in such slow activities rooted in tradition one “connects a mindfulness in the present with a heightened awareness of historicity.”¹⁹ While laboring to resist this breakdown, the owner of an unfinished project reveals our disconnection from expansive and meaningful production.

Our economic system demands that processes we engage in offer achievement that can be understood in the here and now. “These then are the hallmarks of the society brought about by the striving of Western man: the control of the environment as measured in terms of achievement, interest in the present, and interest in process as such.”²⁰ The patient process of nature Valery refers to, characterized as continuous, repetitive and cyclical, stands in opposition to this Western notion of progress as a singular goal or destination. Jonathan Z. Smith in his essay, “A Stitch in Time Saves Nine” explains the operating definition of meaning as, “singularly teleological-conceived either as giving a directionality to or as a ‘breaking in’ on a linear temporal movement”.

¹⁸ J.T. Fraser, “Comments on Time, Process and Achievement,” The Voices of Time: A Cooperative Survey of Man’s Views of Time as Expressed by the Sciences and by the Humanities, 2nd Edition, ed. J.T. Fraser (Amherst: U of Mass. Press, 1981) 137.

¹⁹ Parkins 41.

²⁰ Fraser 137.

Conversely, because repetition is cyclical it is relegated to the realm of the habitual, leading to the conclusion that “repetition is inherently meaningless.”²¹ This bias towards the unique and unrepeatable overlooks a gradual meaning that is experienced through the revisiting and repetition of the familiar. Making a case for this, Rebecca Solnit in her study of the history of walking writes, “My circuit was almost finished, and at the end of it I knew what my subject was and how to address it in a way I had not six miles before. It had come to me not in a sudden epiphany but with a gradual sureness, a sense of meaning like a sense of place.”²² Solnit’s observation suggests that there is a different way to understand our relationship to time aside from the dominant model of an ever-accelerating linear temporal movement.

Solnit’s thoughtful insights on pace resonate with my own art practice. For someone invested in skills acquired through hand labor and craftsmanship my question is not so much how we arrived at this frenzied state of production but how do we slow down? It would seem that moving back and forth between the paces of the body and technology is not easy to do. Once caught up in the flow of machination it is difficult for the body to remember what came before, and to feel comfortable within it. This modern sense of immediacy paired with the commodification of time acts as a preface to our everyday activity, where the tendency is to file each minute of the day under one of two categories corresponding to monetary value; productive or unproductive. Each day we re-

²¹ Smith 72.

²² Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust: A History of Walking (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000) 13.

experience the loss of our free time, and each day we practice our skills at efficiency in an effort to combat that loss. “Even on this headland route going nowhere useful, this route that could only be walked for pleasure, people had trodden shortcuts between the switchbacks as though efficiency was a habit they couldn’t shake.”²³ We have taught ourselves to tend towards a diligence in regards to our use of time. Allowing for frivolous activity is always understood in relation to its opposite and measured within an economy that equates value with profit.

Within the current social climate, characterized by unprecedented speed and accuracy, I find myself in a daily struggle to reconcile my actions to the perfection of the second. Admittedly, clock time serves a necessary practical function, but conversely it equates all types of experience with no consideration of the unique duration inherent in differing events and processes. “It imposes rather than extracts a unity and wholeness through homogenization and reduction.”²⁴ My work as an artist engages in an effort to resist this reductive effect. Reading Solnit’s description of walking as a way of experiencing embodiment and a relationship to one’s surroundings, I thought of making as a way to feel these same effects. My hands walk through my materials and the table I work at becomes a landscape of its own. It occurred to me that the atom is a material I can’t get my hands on. Because of its undeniable materiality, I am

²³ Solnit 10.

²⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, “Thinking of the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought,” Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures, ed. Elizabeth Grosz (New York: Cornell UP, 1999) 18.

instantly drawn to the ritual of the ancient Romans as I imagine the hammering of a hand-forged nail into an unwavering wall year after year. In my studio, unlike outside of it, time serves as a measurement of an investment of labor, not a restriction in which that labor must fit itself into.

Experiencing duration from the studio to the larger social sphere is an exercise in navigating between two different relationships to time. These relationships can be understood as temporal and non-temporal where,

non-temporal time is based on measurement: time is measured and repeatable but also quantifiable and hence may run out. Temporal time, by contrast is a mode of experience rather than a form of measurement; it is not a sense of time as invariant repetition but as constitutive, a becoming of what has not been before, which can be experienced rather than measured.²⁵

By habitually calibrating each happening of our day via wristwatch, cell phone, or laptop to the same unforgiving system the nuances of duration are lost in the translation. While these modes, referred to as non-temporal and temporal, operate within the same economy it is important to note their differences. The value of an unfinished project changes depending upon which lens you choose to view it through. As a maker, I know that the pleasure experienced when sustained concentration is applied to a process is not appropriately understood as a quantity but speaks more to a quality. Although these objects lack a finale the endeavor nonetheless is embedded in the object and is the trace of an experience of quality. By measuring incompleteness against the regulations of the

²⁵ Parkins 40.

clock we are forced to recognize these things as time consuming failures and nothing of the self-investment they represent.

Clock-time also fails to recognize the validity and multiplicity of individual pace. Pace seems to me as characteristic to individual identity as temperament or disposition. But as a unique quality varying from one person to another, the range of tempos at which we approach everyday experience is overlooked, overridden by a fixation with haste. In the book, *Slow Living*, the authors write about the speed regime, where “a new binarism positions fast as a signifier of desire, resource, superiority, efficiency, libidinal energy, performance and intelligence. Slow, in contrast becomes a signifier of frustration lack, inferiority, deficiency, impotence, weakness.”²⁶ Considering modernity’s preference for speed, a slow thinker sounds too much like a slow learner, which is understood as a hindrance and thus, something to overcome. Challenging the compatibility of our value system to human function Solnit writes, “I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness.”²⁷ With my own disposition in mind I’ve become suspicious of the assumption that speed embodies an inherent superiority. I know that there is another side to speed; one which embraces carelessness and is satisfied with “good enough”.

²⁶ Parkins 39.

²⁷ Solnit 10.

As speed is seemingly equated with efficiency and professionalism, however, slowness can become a way of presenting an alternative set of values. In my studio, I come across small clues that allude to this gentle resistance. The most common, appear in the form of passing inquiry from fellow students such as, “You’re still working on that same project?” I haven’t dismissed this critique totally as the pressure to make progress is always felt. But, I choose to look at these comments as hints that I am on the right track. The expression of concern or disappointment, however well meant, points to a belief that it is important to work through ideas quickly, producing visible change. “To declare the value of slowness in our work, in our personal life, in public life, is to promote a position counter the dominant value system of ‘the times.’ ”²⁸ By rejecting speed as the only mode of temporality, slowness can function as a political statement. Solnit states this socio-political significance aptly when she writes,

If there is a history of walking, then it too has come to a place where the road falls off, a place where there is no public space and the landscape is being paved over, where leisure is shrinking and being crushed under the anxiety to produce, where bodies are not in the world but only in doors, in cars and buildings, and an apotheosis of speed makes those bodies seem anachronistic or feeble. In this context, walking is a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences.²⁹

²⁸ Parkins 1.

²⁹ Solnit 12.

Hand making, like walking, belongs to the realm of slow actions on the verge of disappearance. Sifting through the hills, flats, and horizons of my workbench, making, in an economy of conveniences, is my scenic route.

As I neared the end of this essay, I wondering how on earth I should finish something so invested in the unfinished. A quote by Henri Bergson I had come across in early researching resurfaced, “[t]hus the living being essentially has duration; it has duration precisely because it is continuously elaborating what is new and because there is no elaboration without searching, no searching without groping. Time is this very hesitation” (qtd. in Grosz 15).³⁰ I imagined that Rebecca has read this quote as the two shared a reverence for duration. The work I do has been informed by theirs and is inspired by these moments of slowness, transition and hesitation other wise overlooked in an environment filled with end products. With Bergson and Solnit’s words in mind, I decided that the negotiation between everyday temporalities illustrated in hand making and the resulting unfinished projects are actions characterized by a conscious reinvention of life in the present, rather than a nostalgic escape to an imagined community or romanticized past. If you subscribe to the belief that time shows itself as a continuous becoming, comprising stops and starts and everything in between, there is no finale.

³⁰ Grosz 15.

Were you able to finish?

Trajectories

Though the project was found in an unfinished state, the disconnected pieces had as much to say, perhaps more, than a single garment could. In mining the contents of the box, I came across a sample of my neighbor's handwriting on a torn note card that read, "Left front pocket." It was a marker for her, a placeholder for the lost brown tissue paper template that corresponded to the pattern piece. She wrote in a long and graceful cursive; a form of script that has for the most part been abandoned by my generation. I wrote the same words on a separate piece of paper, noticing that my own handwriting is a mixture, falling somewhere between cursive and print. Perhaps my haphazard technique is emblematic of the transitory time period in which I grew up. The Silicon Valley in the early 80's to the late 90's saw the very beginnings of the home computer and handwriting's fade toward obscelesence.

Continuing my inquiry, I googled "Vogue Pattern 1462, Paris Originals" and found that the coat was designed by Jacques Heim, a relatively unimportant figure in fashion until the shock of the bikini. Jacques Heim was second runner up in the race to develop a new addition to women's swimwear. His version, the Atome, came just weeks after the initial introduction of the Bikini, named after the atomic bomb tested by the U.S. on the Bikini Atolls in 1946. Its name suggests the impact the garment had to the fashion world, but with hindsight presented itself as an inappropriate and insensitive

comparison. Today the people of the Bikini Atolls are involved in an ongoing lawsuit against the U.S. Government to recoup the irreversible damages done to their island.

Using the materials of the discarded object I began unraveling the fabric, while at the same time thinking of ways I could re-assemble it and reinvent it. I liked this idea of a continuous making and unmaking, always avoiding a singular and final result. While working with the fabric I thought of all these connections, however vague, between the unfinished project and its place within the larger world. This thing that had come very close to being a women's coat, in my studio was becoming quite complicated. The disparate bits of information gave the un-sewn coat multiplicity and resonance. I knew that if I took these parts and assembled them together all of these trajectories would be lost, integrated into one object. I decided to allow the contents of the box to grow into an ornate network, stretching to the past, motioning toward a future, and traversing the present, simultaneously and in no particular order.

In the Middle

“The universe exists only in transit and man is great not in his goals but in his transitions.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In the midst of my inquiry into unfinished projects, the question arises, what does it mean for an object to be located in the middle, no longer one thing but not yet another? In attempting to think through my neighbor’s abandoned project, I hoped to discover something of its position within our contemporary culture. While the coat pattern was uncooperative within the ordinary discourse of linear progress, consumption oriented production, and meaning in end result I wondered if another discourse might be applied. Gilles Deleuze stands out as an expert of the topic having said that, “It is never the beginning or the end that are interesting; the beginning and the end are points. What is interesting is the middle.”³¹ The writings of Deleuze as well as his collaborative theories with Felix Guattari, have provided ways to address these partialities, opening possibilities for new ways of valuing experience within the current technological climate. In exploring these alternate paradigms of thought in relation to human production within a capitalist economy, I thought it possible to support a perspective of these objects as subtle yet radical moments within the everyday.

³¹ John Phillips, “Deleuze and Guattari: Lecture Notes,” 10 April. 2006, National University of Singapore Web Forum, 1 Feb. 2009 <<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/deleuzeandguattari.htm>>

Viewing the disconnected materials as radical entities in their refusal to support a final meaning, I knew I was creating a revolutionary aura around Vogue Pattern 1462, and wondered if I was working hard at making something out of nothing. Currently, my studio had become a shelter for other unfinished projects as I had been seeking out these leftovers in second hand stores and asking my peers to donate projects they were no longer interested in completing. During this period of collecting, I was attempting to tackle Deleuzian theory, having been seduced by some stunning snippets of his writing. It seemed natural to compare these various items, taking up the space of my studio, to Deleuze's thoughts on production. Using the metaphor of rhizomatic growth, he forges a path for production, allowing it to express an infinite number of iterations. Looking into the subject, I found that it exists in contrast to the type of growth seen in trees. Whereas trees are rooted to a single spot, coordinated by a central trunk and organized on fixed and vertical lines, plant life such as grasses and orchids have no roots, but rhizomes. These creeping underground stems spread sideways on dispersed, horizontal networks of swollen or slender filaments and produce vertical shoots along their length that surface, resulting in distributions of plants. These plants defy categorization as individuated entities and exist as multiplicities, rather than unified subjects.

For these reasons a rhizome has no beginning or end, but is engaged in a continuous process of growth. For Deleuze the network serves as a possible model for social production, as he issues a warning against locking process together with modern production.

Whilst it departs from the schemas of representation, information, and communication', production nonetheless 'appeals to an ongoing dialectical miracle of the transformation of matter into meaning, content into expression, the social process into a signifying system. It is this danger against which caution works, the totalization of processes into a single grammatical or logical form. Production roots itself then re-produces arborescently, whilst process is rhizomatic, chronogentic, rootless: it doesn't branch reproductively but repeats differently, neutral and indifferent, [...].³²

Using models of natural production to think through social production, linear growth shows itself as a normalizing flow reducing life to what has been already decided. Operating under the social radar, a rhizomatic system can offer the creation of new meaning specifically because meaning is not its intention. I thought of the category of unfinished projects in respect to this non-linear growth, and the coat as existing on the cusp of production and process.

Arrested along its intended trajectory, the abandoned project functions as the emblem of an in-between location. Viewed as production, Vogue Pattern 1462 is merely somewhere along a pre-determined journey to a single logical form. But viewed purely as process this object is a representation of transformation and need not be measured by an ability to fulfill an intended end. Not yet a coat, the object still contains the possibility of becoming anything or perhaps a lot of things.

Growth in this way, defined as process versus production, looks different. Perhaps the significance of process as a destination is unrecognizable because

³² Dianne Beddoes, "Deleuze, Kant and Indifference," Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer. ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (London: Routledge, 1997) 38.

we tend to see meaning in feats of production, grand finales, and moments described as “the end”. Take for example the growth of orchids. An expansive entity offering no real beginning or end, they occasionally produce small points of blossom on the surface. Not to be mistaken as the purpose or goal, the colorful blooms exist as traces of the larger production at work. But incompatible with our value system, certain activity is nearly invisible, like the underbelly of rhizomatic structures, blending into the foundation of the everyday. Because such subtle engagement goes largely unnoticed, it doesn’t ask for our scrutiny and instead is assumed to be useless or meaningless. Writing on the moments that happen in between the actual work Solnit writes, “I kept coming back to this route for respite from my work and for my work too, because thinking is generally thought of as doing nothing in a production-oriented culture, and doing nothing is hard to do. It’s best done by disguising it as doing something, and the something closest to doing nothing is walking” (5).³³ The peculiar prospect of doing nothing is contingent on our definition of something. For a moment, perhaps because spring had just arrived and people appeared to be content to stand beneath the sunshine, it seemed so simple to slightly adjust these definitions. In disguising idleness as action, Solnit has made an adjustment of her own and cleverly found a way around our strongly rooted value system.

By stopping short of fulfilling the linear structure of progress, unfinished projects fail to perform the familiar role of commodity and confront us with a

³³ Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust: A History of Walking, (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000) 5.

peculiar and unquantifiable object. With their ambiguous qualities in mind I found myself thinking about the language within Deleuze and Guattari's response to Freudian theory regarding the repression of desire. There was something about the way the projects displayed an engagement in production, while denying a final meaningful object or consumable product. Reviewing Freud's theory, individual development from the time of birth tends toward a pre-existing system, ultimately fulfilling the binary roles of male and female. It is to this end that the negotiation of our desires serves to facilitate a process that manages appropriate self-expression within an assumed social structure. At the root of this theory, social production is a process based on the guided repression of human desire. It is this negotiation or repression of desire that Deleuze and Guattari challenge, cautious to overlook the capitalist umbrella under which this process occurs. "Although capitalism delivers an unprecedented array of individual freedoms and opportunities it does so by antecedently yoking these freedoms and opportunities to the logic of repressed desire."³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari suggest that desire is a natural force that finds expression through the process of production. The problem arises when the capitalist system channels the flow of desire into consumptive practices, preventing desire from being expressed. Using machines as a metaphor, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the landscape of desire as expressed through a broad spectrum of connective and productive forces.

³⁴ Daniel Conway, "Tumbling dice," Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (New York: Routledge, 1997) 79.

The productive synthesis, the production of production, is inherently connective in nature: “and....” “and then....” This is because there is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow (the breast-the mouth). And because the first machine is in turn connected to another whose flow it interrupts or partially drains off, the binary series is linear in every direction. Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented.³⁵

The unfinished projects currently residing in my studio are fragmentary in nature. They are no longer a collection of materials but cannot yet be considered whole unified objects. In this way they are evidence of a resistance of our social structure characterized by linear and binary parameters as if to say, “if we must produce, lets produce but never finish!” By continuously starting new projects those responsible for unfinished projects embody a desire toward production, making, building, sewing, shaping, but never giving the final form expected of them.

In comparison to our dizzying world of finished products, the problem with incomplete objects points to this lack of a final form and thus an inability for value to be assigned. We can measure the worth of a final product and in doing so subject it to a market where it can be bought and sold. It seems possible that it is because of this uncertain identity that the incomplete state holds a lowly position within our overwhelmingly commodified culture. For Deleuze, this suspension in a state of process, no longer raw materials but not yet a completed item, is not a short coming but a source of strength. Manuel De

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1983) 5.

Landa interprets Deleuze's opinion that, "most of the important philosophical insights can be grasped only at the process of morphogenesis, before the final form is actualized, before the difference disappears."³⁶ Vogue Pattern 1462 cannot yet be given to us in the form of experience we are familiar with and thus is not a being but a becoming. Deleuze describes "becoming" as a process driven by difference where by the collaboration of elements embodying differing intensities give rise to the phenomena of human experience. In order to avoid looking at the world as the effect of previous causes or the resulting form of those causes we must seek out,

a flow that does not allow the intensive processes to become hidden underneath the extensive results. It is only these far from equilibrium conditions, only in this singular zone of intensity, that difference driven morphogenesis comes into its own and matter becomes an active material agent, one that does not need form to come and impose itself from the outside.³⁷

Applying this to the flow of objects within the everyday, it is the unfinished moments, where the processes are revealed in jagged edges, fragmented parts, strewn about tools, and lists of instructions are able to speak volumes that a seamless thing could never say. In these objects lay the potential of a future.

³⁶ Manuel De Landa, "Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Open-ended Becoming," Becomings: Explorations of Time, Memory, and Futures, ed. Elizabeth Grosz (New York: Cornell UP, 1999) 32.

³⁷ De Landa 32.

“It’s the unpredictable incidents between official events that add up to a life, the incalculable that gives it value.”³⁸

The value of these unfinished projects resides in their seeming imperfection. Embedded with the talents and short-comings of their makers objects like my neighbors incomplete coat point to experience that exists as a state of pause. Within this contained and frozen moment, while the rest of the world is quickly passing by, perhaps we can afford to ask some questions about where we are and cautiously peer at where we are going. If the future is already determined in the past than what lies ahead? Is it merely that stiff function of time where projects, ideas and relationships previously began become realized, formalized and finished? Is this a desirable destination? In the midst of our product driven culture, can we value experience as truly open and entertain the past and the present as continuously offering possibilities? What is wrong with starting and starting again?

“The universe exists only in transit and man is great not in his goals but in his transitions.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

³⁸ Solnit 10.

