

MODE OF PRODUCTION

by

Chad James Carignan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Art

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

April 2016

©COPYRIGHT

by

Chad James Carignan

2016

All Rights Reserved

LIST OF IMAGES

Images	Page
1. Gallery Shot .....	14
2. Detail.....	15
3. Detail.....	16
4. Detail.....	17

## ABSTRACT

I am driven by a desire to understand economic practices through the production of a commodity. Specialization and repetition as modes of production allow me to model the structures which modern societies are built upon. The objects, which are miniature cinderblocks, are extruded, cut, stacked, fired and assembled as structures with the blocks serving as markers of commodity. We are living in a time in which the practices required to support our current standards of living are in question, from concerns with sustainability to workers rights. Through this process I gain insight into contemporary practices of production. Viewer participation provides the opportunity for the work to transform from a marker of commodity to an object with a value of use for the consumer.

Through the creation of a commodity, using a specialized labor practice, I have created a body of work encouraging insight into the framework and practices involved in the production and consumption of manufactured goods. The commodity I have created is a clay miniature cinderblock, which through its production and sale will be used to evaluate the forces at work in economic practices. The model from which I have formed my inquiry is Marx's Mode of Production which includes factors in the forces of production as well as the social relationships within an economy. I have created a process of labor allowing for the production of a commodity, which stands to represent the forces as well as social aspects necessary in manufacturing goods. The labor done is specific to clay manufacturing concerning historical ways of producing objects made to work within a small studio setting. Value is given to the commodity in its inherent use value to the consumer (whatever that may be per individual consumer) as well as through a representation of materials and labor. Through the creation of a mode of production including labor practices, resourcing materials and how a commodity is taken to market I am able to critique the practices I see at work driving capitalist endeavors concerning market commodities. With participation of the viewer the work is transformed as the impact of purchasing goods affects the overall structure and interaction with the piece.

The material used for this practice is clay. Clay has proven to be a material of great abundance, affordability and ideal for creating multiples in an efficient way. The majority of the clay sourced for this project has been industrial refuse, diverted from a destination in a landfill. Although it would be nice to use local materials for such a product, promoting local sustainable ideals, sourced reclaim has proven to have its

benefits. First, the industrial clay has been processed to a point where by just adding water and slaking it down, it is ready to use. This is opposed to local materials needing to be hammer milled and refined to remove large chunks and impurities, increasing time and labor involved in creating a product. I believe that the use of a free material as opposed to adding extra work to the process also reflects how many manufacturers source their materials; instead of using what is local and beneficial to the local economy, resources are mined and extracted where it is of the most convenience to the manufacturer.

Fortunately for the creation of this work, resourcing discarded materials offers an affordable, green (in that it is keeping materials from a landfill) and currently sustainable manner. Material acquisition interests me in current times considering how practices observed through past and current trade legislation, including the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), encourages the alienation of workers and the environment under a guise of creating jobs in a level playing field and promotion of manufacturing. “Activists around the world have opposed the TPP, warning it will benefit corporations at the expense of health, the environment, free speech and labor rights.”<sup>1</sup> What is disregarded in this legislation are human rights and environmental concerns as corporations are given free reign to produce where and how they please with legal ramifications forced upon any locality opposed to the corporation’s practices.

The process used to turn this raw resource into a commodity representing the forces of production is an involved and labor specific practice. By creating a specialized labor task, I am able to promote ideas of efficiency through mechanized production. As I

---

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Amy. "Full Text of TPP Trade Deal Revealed." *Democracy Now!* Pacifica, Nov. 2015. Web. Nov. 2015.

become a manufacturer, I am able to oversee every step of the process, from material acquisition to taking the commodity to market and seeking a monetary exchange as a simile for the use, purchase and sale of objects throughout the global economy. Through this process, I am able to critique through my own practices, those used on a greater scale. Just as any manufacturing process evolves with time, my process has grown as well. What started on a small wall mounted extruder, using hand formed balls of clay creating short extrusions which were cut one block at a time, has turned in to a fast productive way to create objects in a very mechanical way. The process now includes an industrial pug mill allowing for large quantities of clay to be pushed through the die form with minimal effort on my part. The process includes a roller table to catch the extrusions exiting the pug mill, as well as ware boards for transportation and drying. Also improved is the extrusion-cutting device, where I used to cut one at a time I am now able to cut fourteen. I believe innovation and product development are a key part to a productive manufacturing process. This is to a point though; although I have improved my practices, I am still the sole producer and one at work in producing the objects. Historically, innovation has done as much to hurt the opportunities for the employees as much as it has increased the well being of humanity. “In the Age of the Smart Machine” by Shoshana Zuboff the author offers a critique of the advances of technology in the work place and its effects on the worker,

“Technology represents intelligence systematically applied to the problem of the body. It functions to amplify and surpass the organic limits of the body; it compensates for the body’s fragility and vulnerability. Industrial technology has substituted for the human body in many of the processes associated with production and so has redefined the limits of production formerly imposed by the body. As a result, society’s capacity to produce

things has been extended in a way that is unprecedented in human history. This achievement has not been without its costs, however. In diminishing the role of the worker's body in the labor process, industrial technology has also tended to diminish the importance of the worker."<sup>2</sup>

It is an interesting paradox, as technology in many ways makes our lives better through safety, efficiency, and convenience, it also seems that it has offered to the alienation of the worker in specialized labor tasks as well as overall necessity in the workplace.

Along with advancements in extruding and cutting, the firing process has also evolved. The first kiln built for the cinderblocks was able to fire about four hundred at a time, something close to what I could produce in a few days. When production bumped up to reaching over one thousand in a day, I needed a new kiln. On the new kiln I have been able to fire up to three thousand cinderblocks at a time, though the most effective number allowing for heat transfer and variation in surface is around fifteen hundred. The cinderblocks are fired in a way that recalls traditional brick production using a scove kiln (a kiln created of the product being fired), with the cinderblocks stacked in a corbelled arch on top of a firebox. By firing the cinderblocks I am able to produce a lasting product out of the clay, something that can be traded and sold creating an object that will last for the buyer. Creating a lasting object solidifies the representation of a marker; a marker in that they represent the time necessary for production as well as a quantity of resources, mined and altered to create something of use value. The cinderblocks are wood fired using left over material from a local cabinet shop. This allows me to control the method of firing, while knowing where my energy source comes from. Along with allowing more interaction with the materials used, using refuse material encourages recycling by

---

<sup>2</sup> Zuboff, Shoshana. *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*. New York: Basic, 1988. 22. Print.

keeping more materials out of a landfill and repurposing usable materials instead of supporting extraneous energy resources. By creating a structure out of the cinderblocks, which highlights the materials used, while referencing the altered landscape (whether that be mining or urban development) I am able to create a situation where the participant is involved with the work to a level that recreates a market experience while thinking about the production and consumption of raw materials.

The function of the cinderblocks as a symbol is very important to the transmission of the ideas within the work. Given the context of the work being in a gallery, the cinderblocks are inherently an art object but I will refer to them as a commodity. The basis of understanding almost anything is having a core, shared understanding of symbols, it is how we communicate. The commodities that I create act as symbols. When a person approaches the work they will first see the cinderblock shape, an easily recognizable form found in contemporary western architecture. Without going too far into thought, ideas of cheap, easily manufactured abundant materials come to mind. At first glance, these are building materials with which I have created some form referencing a built landscape, except they obviously aren't real cinderblocks, they're representations of a cinderblock made with another material. I enjoy having the ability to use a referent to bridge gaps, using symbols of shared understanding to communicate an idea. The viewer might ask, what is this material, where did all this material come from or how were these structures built? Somebody with a background in ceramics might be able to say these are wood fired clay objects; this gives that particular viewer a greater understanding to the materials and process but the importance of the object lies in the variation in color and

symbol of the object being a recognizable building block. For me these blocks talk about material use through the creation of an absurd amount of multiples, as well as time through surface variation and development.

By stacking the cinderblocks I create a landscape, which can bring to mind material use as well as land development. Parts of the structures appear to be eroded, or failing. This altering of a built form to appear defunct brings up ideas of time and impermanence within the landscape. All of these decisions, from use of material, shape of form and representation of the landscape uphold my ideas of using the cinderblocks, as a marker concerning aspects of time, labor, material use and development. Maya Lin is an artist whose work concerning landscapes I have always found interesting. "Maya Lin works with a vocabulary of form culled from her study of landscape. By altering scale and materials, she creates works that connect the ideal and the real."<sup>3</sup> Her use of materials from the landscape to represent the landscape is something I very much appreciate and try to emulate through my work while trying to create metaphors of the altered landscape within the gallery. The processing of clay, a material from the landscape, used to create a built environment within the gallery allows the work to wholly represent a symbolic use of the land and development.

The other symbol that brings the work full circle within the context of the gallery is the dollar. "The commodity that functions as a measure of value, and, either in its own person or by a representative, as the medium of circulation is money."<sup>4</sup> We all know

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, Richard. "Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes - Installation." *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes - Installation*. Arcspace, May 2006. Web. Mar. 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I*. Moscow: Progress, 1867. *Capital Volume I*. Book on Demand Ltd., 2013. Web. 2015.

what a dollar is, we've all had one and it's fair to say that there is a shared understanding of what the dollar represents in terms of monetary value. As for the dollars sign in the gallery, I don't want it to represent necessarily its monetary value as in a dollar is worth a soda or something of that sort. I believe the dollar, given its relatively low value and understanding as a representation of the monetary institution, (we've all heard 'the dollar' as a marker against other economic values or national monetary systems) the dollar works well as a simple marker of trade.

With the two symbols at work in the gallery, the dollar and the cinderblock, viewers are given an opportunity to take part in a system of trade. In a sense I have created a market that is both theoretical, and physical. The market I have created is theoretical in that the commodities that I have produced function as representations of commodity through the use of symbols and interaction. One can see them as a commodity, as an art object in the art world and through that as a symbol for the economic practices we all take part in. The cinderblocks stand to represent resources, labor, and the time that goes into creating objects of commodity. I am in awe of the systems at work in the economy, from great holes in the ground necessary to produce our goods, to the vast quantities at work when looking at trade commodities and monetary values exchanged. I find Camille Paglia's term 'male sublime poetry' very representational of my views of these achievements,

"We could make an epic catalog of male achievements, from paved roads, indoor plumbing, and washing machine to eyeglasses, antibiotics and disposable diapers. We enjoy safe, fresh milk and meat, and vegetables and tropical fruits heaped in snowbound cities. When I cross the George Washington Bridge or any of America's great bridges, I think: *men* have done this. Construction is a sublime male poetry. When I see a giant crane

passing on a flatbed truck, I pause in awe and reverence as I would for a church processions.”<sup>5</sup>

We often buy things without understanding the underlying history of the object or the systems the purchase supports, but are in amazement when we see container ships or massive holes in the ground. I often find myself to be in amazement when in the presence of a large city admiring the grand architecture, while also considering the resources and energy expended in the production of such objects. I fear that few are given the opportunity to fully grasp the scale of production required to achieve these creations, I will admit my concern while also confessing some ignorance concerning the planning and level of production involved. The objects represented in the gallery-based market should be read as markers within a system we all take part in but often know little about. This is a system, given the circumstances of the environment we live in, that we have little choice but to participate. Our environment has created a need for capital exchange through production and consumption. Through our being, we function in this manner but it seems the functions of the system have served well to benefit the aspiring capitalists far more than the proverbial cogs in the machine, being the laborers.

To gain an understanding of markets and commodities, I have used Marx’s model of a mode of production to demonstrate the process at work within an economy. The ideas laid out in Marx’s “Capital” are the workings of capitalism and producing surplus value within commodities through consumption of commodities and labor power. Through this process I wear many hats within the mode of production, a consumer, the means of production, and the capitalist. It is not my intent to create a representation of a

---

<sup>5</sup> Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. 37. Print.

fair capitalist mode, my process is based on an understanding of symbols and a trade of these symbols at a low enough value to encourage participation and inform the viewer of the systems at work. The problem I see with what capitalism now represents is an unfair formula, one that favors the capitalist much more than the laborer. I will say, I am not against capitalism, but I disagree with the rigged capitalist system benefiting the rich few much more than the average people of society. Since the end of the twentieth century, there has been a sharp separation in growth when comparing values produced by the Gross Domestic Product to those of Average Household Income. Great sums of money are being made and the economy is doing well, for now. Unfortunately, as the economy appears to do well on paper, it is the average people within the economy that are suffering. This sharp separation around the end of the previous century is due to decades of neoliberal politics promoting global free trade at the expense of the work force as well as the environment. Realizing the process at work within our current economic system drives me to create a body of work that raises questions in our values concerning current modes of production.

This work, both the material form and the ideas behind it could have never been fully realized without first recognizing great works of art that have infected my psyche concerning the human condition. I will start with someone who I feel is one of the greatest artists of our generation, Ai Weiwei. In relating to this work both aesthetically through the use of the multiple and in theory, concerning values of labor, and political systems, I believe the “The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds” is of great significance. In the way that they were produced in a Chinese clay city, using hundreds of

workers to create millions of pieces, the seeds represent many things concerning labor, the political environment as well companionship. “Yet Ai remembers the sharing of sunflower seeds as a gesture of human compassion, providing a space for pleasure, friendship and kindness during a time of extreme poverty, repression and uncertainty.”<sup>6</sup> The sunflower seed has many interpretations for representation within Chinese culture; it is an export, it is consumed heavily by laborers, and as mentioned previously it is a token of friendship and pleasure. The sunflower also represents the people of China turning to Mao as the sun of China, proving to be a powerful political symbol, which Ai used to subvert the political regime through scale and interaction with the viewers. These are things that also concern my ideals that I attempt to show in my work, although it is in a different aesthetic and vein of concept, there are aesthetic and conceptual ties that I have found very important to my work, giving insight and motivation in use of the multiple.

With the use of clay as a medium to talk about the work environment, Lawrence Epps’ work “Take Stock” is the closest aesthetic resemblance to my work while also sharing some similarities in concept. Epps produced an installation of ceramic extrusions to create a cityscape of workers to talk about high stress work environments; by creating extrusions that viewers were invited to take.

“Epps frequently works with industrial extrusion, which uses pressure to force material through a mold. Epps sees this process as a metaphor for the rise of corporate culture and its effect on individuals. Clay is his material of choice for this project because, according to him, it is “low status, dirty, and tactile”—ostensibly the opposite of cubicle life. The installations he creates are often formed from masses of smaller figures; these

---

<sup>6</sup> Bingham, Juliet. "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds: Interpretation Text." *The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds: Interpretation Text*. Unilever, 2011. Web. 2016.

amalgamations speak to the piecemeal but connected quality to global culture.”<sup>7</sup>

From his use of clay to represent a low tactile material, to stacking multiples and representing the workplace, I find this work provocative in questioning the conditions of work and labor in our current economic system.

Lastly, I share a grim cynicism in the likes of Robert Morris. His interest in land use and his iterations of our use are something to be in awe of, while drawing attention to issues of land politics, creating miniature strip mines or other scars on the land.

“Every large strip mine could support an artist residence. Flattened mountain tops await the aesthetic touch. Dank and noxious acres of spoil piles cry out for some redeeming sculptural shape. Bottomless industrial pits yawn for the creative filling-or deepening. There must be crews out there, straining and tense in the seats of their D-8 caterpillars, waiting for that confident artist to stride over the ravaged ground and give the command, ‘Gentle-men, start your engines, and let us definitively conclude the twentieth century.’”<sup>8</sup>

Morris talks about the absurdity of our endeavors, in a way I think Paglia would appreciate. It’s hard not to be cynical when looking at the situation we are in, with the holes we’ve dug and the economic crisis’ at hand, but I believe that creating work that raises awareness to these issues is the first step at coming to grips with the problems we face.

I don’t believe my work will change the world in any way, and that is not my goal or desire to attempt such an endeavor. I do believe the work functions within the walls of the gallery to raise questions concerning economic values, and the more true to my values

---

<sup>7</sup> C-File. "Exhibition | Lawrence Epps at the British Ceramics Biennial 2013 | CFile - Contemporary Ceramic Art + Design." *CFile Contemporary Ceramic Art + Design*. C-File, 2013. Web. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, Robert. "Notes on Art As/and Land Reclamation". *October* 12 (1980): 87–102. Web

that the work can be the more powerful the message there is to communicate. “The first step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one.”<sup>9</sup> It would be inspiring to believe that through art, we could fix all the problems of the world, but that is a tall order, I do believe raising questions concerning social standards is a great start to finding solutions. By drawing attention to issues that concern us and start a dialogue with people, we can get a ball moving or help a movement gain momentum. When I first got into clay and art, I found pleasure in making utilitarian objects for the simple gratification of creating an object of use and the feelings and ideals that follow while subverting the commercial market. I believe that a conversation starter can be powerful in many ways, through utility, as well as representation. Through creating objects that function to question the status quo and incite change and I have found motivation to create a conversation spanning concerns of land use to economic reform.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Newsroom*. Dir. Aaron Sorkin. Perf. Jeff Daniels. HBO Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Goodman, Amy. "Full Text of TPP Trade Deal Revealed." *Democracy Now!* Pacifica, Nov. 2015. Web. Nov. 2015.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*. New York: Basic, 1988. 22. Print.
- Andrews, Richard. "Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes - Installation." *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes - Installation*. Arcspace, May 2006. Web. Mar. 2016.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I*. Moscow: Progress, 1867. *Capital Volume I*. Book on Demand Ltd., 2013. Web. 2015
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. 37. Print
- Bingham, Juliet. "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds: Interpretation Text." *The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds: Interpretation Text*. Unilever, 2011. Web. 2016
- C-File. "Exhibition | Lawrence Epps at the British Ceramics Biennial 2013 | CFile - Contemporary Ceramic Art + Design." *CFile Contemporary Ceramic Art + Design*. C-File, 2013. Web. 2016
- Morris, Robert. "Notes on Art As/and Land Reclamation". *October* 12 (1980): 87–102.
- Newsroom*. Dir. Aaron Sorkin. Perf. Jeff Daniels. HBO Entertainment, 2012. DVD



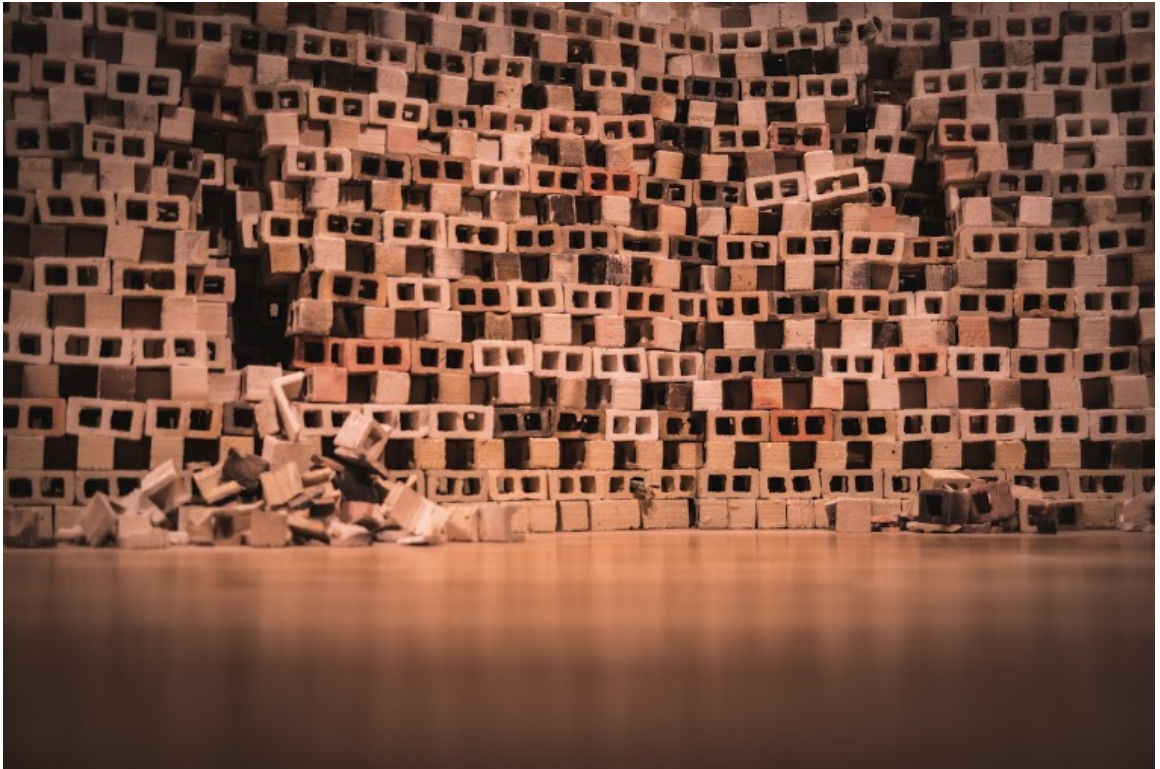
Gallery Overview



Detail



Detail



Detail