

## Johanna Unzueta "Iron Folklore," Queens Museum of Art, New York, 2009

### New York, Capital of the Third World Michèle Faguet

Perhaps one of the unintentional legacies of 20th century conceptual art has been a denigration of the labor process in favor of a privileging of ideas that distances the producer from the materiality of a given medium and reinforces a qualitative distinction between art and craft or between media like photography and video (thought to be intrinsically more conceptual) and more traditional media like painting, drawing and sculpture. While recent years have seen a revival of these traditional media, their vindication has probably more to do with an inflated and excessive art market eager for new products than a critical reinterpretation of art's function in the early 21st century. One of the basic premises of Johanna Unzueta's practice is precisely to valorize the labor intensive process through which she transforms felt - a semi-organic, sensuous, and 'warm' material that both alludes to the practice of dressmaking (typically gendered female and thus undervalued) and is also an obvious reference to Joseph Beuys - into a series of sculptural objects which make (sometimes explicit, sometimes oblique) reference to the cultural history of the industrialization and automation of labor signaling a shift from a productive society to a consumer one. Considering the rapid commodification of contemporary art, particularly during the last decade, and the increasingly blurry distinction between commodity aesthetics and art practice that might be considered 'critical,' the question of labor is particularly significant. With an insistence on the manual aspect of its production that is more conceptual than formal, Unzueta's work may be read against a broad tradition of Western Marxist critique - with its discussions of both alienation and the emancipatory potential of art. But it must also be considered in relation to her own biography as an artist who came of age during the military dictatorship in Chile (which sought to suppress those very same ideals) and who now resides in New York City where she counts herself among the several million Spanish speaking immigrants who have gradually altered the topography of a city that is paradoxically so emblematic of the United States and yet so unrepresentative of its dominant culture.

In a conversation with the artist during the preparation of a previous solo exhibition entitled "Work Dignifies,"<sup>[i]</sup> Unzueta described how this phrase (in Spanish, *el trabajo ennoblece*) had been used often in the working class neighborhood in Santiago where she grew up. Its etymology is complex and varied: although in this context clearly associated with political resistance and revolutionary politics, this aphorism can be tied to the teachings of the Catholic Church (and in Chile its presence is strong and is generally associated with reactionary, right-wing agendas)<sup>[ii]</sup> and even to the Third Reich, with its *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (Reich Labor Service), the function of which was to combat unemployment in Nazi Germany under the motto "Arbeit ardet."<sup>[iii]</sup> There is even a Dutch proverb "Arbeid adelt, maar adel ardeit niet," which means "Work ennobles but the nobility does not work," and points to the ideological, class struggles that are inherent to any discussion of human labor.

In his foreword to *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre - a French philosopher who emphasized Marx's early writings in a desire to reconcile Marxism and philosophy - wrote, "We may certainly affirm that work is the foundation of personal development...[but]...within the framework of...the capitalist regime...work is lived and undergone by the worker as an alien and oppressive power."<sup>[iv]</sup> With these words he paraphrased Marx's theory of alienated labor in which the division of labor produced by the Industrial Revolution dehumanized the modern worker by enforcing repetitive and excruciatingly boring activity creating a historically novel situation: "...in his work...he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind."<sup>[v]</sup> Lefebvre lamented how 19th century literary modernism had initiated a critique of "an insufferable reality" by retreating from everyday, real life and taking flight in an invented world of fantasy and that this had continued up to the historical avant-garde with the Surrealists - a group with which he formally empathized but became increasingly disillusioned- and their preference for the "weird and the bizarre" which Lefebvre argued ultimately translated into a "transcendental contempt for the real, for work for example..."<sup>[vi]</sup> If a significant aspect of the modernist project (in literature and

the visual arts) has been a critique of an existing socio-economic order in what is inherently a desire to make life better, this critique has had varied manifestations all of which might be loosely organized between two conflicting impulses: that of approximating the 'real world' on the one hand, and distancing itself from it on the other.

The problem with this denial of 'real life' is that it implies a resignation with the way things are, so that art and culture more generally take their place among many forms of escapism: at best an ideal of what one wishes life could be more like, and at worst, a dulling of the senses that temporarily alleviates this sense of discontent (or some sort of combination of the two). At one time or another, we have all justified watching bad television or renting a really mindless, feel-good Hollywood production with an explicit desire to not have to think too hard, in order to forget. (Drugs, alcohol, and religion may also be utilized for the same effect). But this merely treats the symptoms of the problem and not its underlying cause, reinforcing a relatively recent historical division between 'work' and 'leisure,' which has been treated by countless philosophers and cultural theorists throughout the 20th century. In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno describes the consequences of this separation in the following manner, "Work while you work, play while you play – this is a basic rule of repressive self-discipline...No fulfillment may be attached to work, which would otherwise lose its functional modesty in the totality of purposes, no spark of reflection is allowed to fall into leisure time, since it might otherwise leap across to the workday world and set it on fire."<sup>[vii]</sup>

Writing in the mid 1940s, Adorno could still claim a certain degree of freedom for the intellectual (himself), from this contrived opposition between personal fulfillment (pleasure, creative stimulation, a sense of autonomy) and productive work. Today the term 'intellectual' sounds hopelessly elitist; now we might think about artists, writers, freelancers, and academics for example, all of whom may presumably still pursue their vocations independently of the corporate interests that have, during the last few decades, rapidly infringed upon every aspect of private and public life, further exaggerating the organization of every hour of every day toward the ultimate goals of productivity (so that we may all be productive members of society, as the saying goes) and consumption. However, in the absence of a strict temporal distinction between work (say, the hours spent in an office) and play (which is more and more about consumption), the two parts of what is essentially a complicated dialectic begin to interact ambiguously and to invade one another leading to inefficient work habits or not so restful leisure activities. This is further exaggerated in a highly competitive contemporary art world in which career success is often based to a great extent on self-promotion and 'entrepreneurial extracurriculars'<sup>[viii]</sup> including obligatory public appearances at art fairs, cocktail parties, screenings, lectures and other similar events, all of which are very time-consuming so that it becomes necessary to out-source the labor involved in the making of the work behind those public personas.

This is entirely consistent with post-conceptual art's foregrounding of ideas rather than technical skill or formal concerns, which falls within what Lefebvre more generally referred to as "...the separation of manual and intellectual work..."<sup>[ix]</sup> With a body of work that emphasizes the manual aspect of her own labor, which ultimately has a conceptual function in that it is less concerned with formal or existential issues and more concerned with the historical problem and political relevance of human labor, Unzueta refuses the terms of this separation while drawing attention to its elitist and ideological character. (One only need look at statistics regarding the average earnings of artists, curators, and critics to see that, despite the social prestige they may enjoy as members of an intellectual elite, in economic terms the vast majority are very much part of a working class.)

The exhibition "Iron Folklore" at the Queens Museum<sup>[x]</sup> takes place in the elevator, along a corridor, and against a large curved wall, all of which are intermediary spaces through which museum visitors would normally move in a distracted manner because there is usually nothing particularly interesting to see here. It is part of a program conceived by the museum for artists to engage with the building's architecture (much of which will be out of use during the museum's upcoming expansion) or to pursue projects off-site that engage with local communities and issues. Given the modesty of Unzueta's work, more accustomed to drawing attention to the value of its production rather than that of the finished

object, this format is highly appropriate for its subtle aspects. And so the massive elevator, used to both transport museum visitors and large, monumental works (or perhaps building supplies like dry wall and paint used to regularly alter or prep the exhibition spaces) is covered with what looks like the kind of corrugated metallic walls typical of garages and other industrial workspaces, except that they are made out of felt and soft to the touch (that is, for whoever dares to touch the art). Upon exiting the elevator onto the second floor, museum visitors may (or may not) notice a long colored plumbing pipe - nothing out of the ordinary for anyone who has lived or spent time in New York City where exposed piping is common in commercial spaces, so many of which have undergone the transformation from artist studios to luxury lofts affordable only to young professionals like lawyers and bankers (or *very* successful artists). The remaining pieces – including a wheelbarrow, a shovel, and a couple of car doors severed from their rightful owner and emitting the sounds of the street of a neighborhood that is particularly significant to Queens- may be found at the end of this corridor resting against the wall as if waiting to be installed in a more appropriate manner.

This last piece – the car door and sound installation- is a reference to a very loaded political and social situation with which anyone who has been following the local news in New York City is well familiar, and from which the exhibition title “Iron Folklore” derives. The reference is Willets Point, also known as the “Iron Triangle,” a commercial area in Queens that is home to several hundred businesses (mostly small auto-repair establishments), which employ over 1,500 individuals (the vast majority of them immigrants). It is a thriving business community and an important destination for thousands of car-owners and drivers of taxi and limousine services as well as an important distribution center for products like flour and Indian spices due to the presence of two-longstanding family businesses (Fodera Foods and House of Spices). Despite this, the area has endured several decades of neglect from the city and has been deprived of even the most basic infrastructure, like sewers, sidewalks, and waste disposal so that it has come to resemble the sort of peripheral neighborhood one is accustomed to seeing in the third world but would never expect to find in the richest city in the most powerful country in the world. For years Willets Point (which enjoys easy access to Manhattan, Connecticut, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Long Island) has been coveted by real estate speculators and many attempts have been made to develop it, but all had gone unrealized until last November when, under increasing pressure from the Bloomberg administration which had declared the area “a euphemism for blight,”<sup>[xi]</sup> the City Council approved a plan to transform the 75 acre area with the construction of a convention center, a hotel, retail spaces and housing units.

There are still many factors that the city will have to navigate before any ground is broken, including a new lawsuit filed in March of this year by local business and land owners, as well as criticism from the Willets Point Defense Committee of a program set up by the city at LaGuardia Community College to retrain workers. Rather than train workers who are already highly skilled but the vast majority of whom are undocumented and would have little opportunity to acquire work anywhere else, the Committee argues that the city must invest funds in relocating these businesses together to a new site, where they may continue to work and to thrive cooperatively with one another - “as a family,” says Committee president Marco Neira, a Colombian business owner who compares the neighborhood’s current conditions to that of *El Cartucho*, a notoriously decrepit area of Bogotá that suffered a similar fate at the beginning of this decade.<sup>[xii]</sup>

One definition of blight is “a deteriorated condition,” but it can also mean “something that impairs growth, withers hopes and ambitions, or impedes progress and prosperity.” Beyond its broken and perpetually flooded streets scattered with debris and populated by ramshackle structures and even the occasional stray dog, Willets Point is a very visible reminder of the kind of labor and conditions that have been displaced by globalization onto populations living outside of the industrialized West but upon which these first world economies continue to depend but would like to deny or forget. In the case of the “Iron Triangle” the hopes and ambitions of those who struggle for the means with which to subsist inevitably impede the progress and prosperity of a consumer ethic that denies the value of the labor upon which that consumption is based. While policy-makers and developers complain that the area is an eyesore that mars what is potentially an otherwise picture perfect landscape featuring the recently constructed Citi

Field stadium - home to the New York Mets - those who work there have endured its deplorable conditions (directly created by successive political administrations motivated by greed) for decades in exchange for a basic right that most of them would be denied outside of this first world informal economy: the right to work and to support themselves and their immediate and extended families. And that is a very basic form of human dignity.

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[i] Or Gallery (Vancouver), January 11-February 23, 2008

[ii] There were, of course, certain segments of the Catholic Church in Chile that departed from this official position and were progressive and critical of the dictatorship and its human rights abuses.

[iii] A related phrase, "Arbeit macht frei" (Work Brings Freedom) was posted at the entrances to numerous concentration camps during WWII.

[iv] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (trans. John Moore), London and New York: Verso, 1991, p.38.

[v] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, p.74.

[vi] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, p. 119

[vii] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (trans. E.F.N. Jephcott), London and New York: Verso, 1999, p. 130.

[viii] Alison Gingeras uses this term to describe Andy Warhol's "...careful construction of a public persona..." See Alison M. Gingeras, "Performing the Self: Martin Kippeberger," *ArtForum*, (Oct 2004), p. 22.

[ix] Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, p. 30.

[x] May 10-September 22, 2009

[xi] Fernando Santos, "A Dilapidated Tract of Queens, and a Fight to Control its Future," *New York Times*, September 9, 2008.

[xii] From a phone interview conducted by the author with Neira on Tuesday, March 25, 2009.