

Labouring Bodies: Art, Work and History

By Danielle Child

Thank you for the invitation to speak.

I feel very lucky to have been able to see *Tools for Life* before lockdown began here in the UK. It is a beautiful exhibition. Despite the temporary closure, the online version is the best digital exhibition that I have seen during lockdown (and I'm not just saying this because I've been invited to speak). It feels like a very long time ago since I was able to freely walk around an art gallery and experience works of art. And being in the room experiencing the work is important to Johanna Unzueta's work because as a sculptural practice it has a relationship to the body and to space. The use of scale (in works such as *Related to Myself* and also *A Garment for the Day*) is something that is as much experiential (lest we forget the Kantian mathematical sublime in which the feeling of the sublime comes about as a result of encountering something overwhelming in size) as visual. I will return to this idea of scale later.

It is clear that labour in numerous guises underpins Unzueta's practice. So I would like to begin this talk with a look at the relationship between labour and art, and art history, something upon which my research – as a modern and contemporary art historian - is focused. But first, I should say something about how I approach the study of art history; I refer to my approach as historical materialist. In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Walter Benjamin understood that history was often written by the victors – something that we are still feeling today. (Art History was historically the domain of white, middle-class men...) He wrote that the task of the historical materialist was thus to 'brush history against the grain'. To brush wood against the grain is to reveal the rough texture and to work against the dominant direction. In my research, this often manifests in the task of revealing the hidden hands of the makers or the invisible labour embodied in making works of art. This hidden nature is, of course, tied up with ideas of hierarchy, the economic and of social class. My approach is preoccupied with asking *who* is doing the making, and questioning *why* some laboring practices are hidden. While those of the artist are often not.

My interest in labour in relation to art comes from my own working-class upbringing. My father – now retired - was a skilled manual worker, a mechanic. When I began to read and hear about the employed labour (beyond that of the artist) in the arts while studying art history it peaked my interest. I often refer to this practice as employing the ‘invisible hand of the maker’. The use of the phrase ‘invisible hand’ here, of course, is a reference to the 18th century Scottish economist Adam Smith’s invisible hand in his economic writings. A term that he used to refer to the invisible hand of the market; that is, the unobservable market forces within a free market economy. Unlike Smith’s metaphorical hand, in my usage this is a real hand attached to an employed worker. And so I adapt this phrase to refer to that of the artisans, craftspeople, fabricators, assistants and other makers involved in the production of a work of art whose visibility is often obscured to accommodate the demands of the market.

This leads me onto the second aspect of an historical materialist approach: the economic context. This involves looking outside of the work of art, to its conditions of making, to the wider social, historical and economic contexts under which the works are made. In my research, this is usually the wider context of capitalism. So, why is it important to think about art in terms of labour? Despite capitalism’s various transmutations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, labour remains central to the capitalist system. Without labour, there would be no surplus value created, without surplus value there would be no profit and without profit there would be no capitalist system. Capital only has one goal and that is profit. For Karl Marx, labour was that magical element that turns materials into commodities once exchanged for money. And, despite its various contemporary guises, labour also remains reliant on human intervention. Something that we are very aware of in the current climate in which those workers who sustain society have been made increasingly visible as others are furloughed or working from the confine of their homes. [This idea of human intervention is something that I think Unzueta’s practice makes clear throughout the exhibition.] But it would be incorrect to equate the labour of art with that of everyday commodities; the

making of art is not the same as the production of general commodities. The theorist Dave Beech argues that art is economically exceptional – that is, its value is not produced in the same way as a commodity for the market. However, Beech is clear that neither is the idea of art's economic exceptionalism an economic argument for art's autonomy from the wider conditions of capitalism. So, we might ask why has there been so little attention paid to labour in the analysis of art when labour takes such an important role within capitalism?

The development of a modernist art history is a likely source of labour's disappearance from discussions of art. This is the period in which the 'art for art's' sake mantra was adopted – and critiqued – but nonetheless, one in which the art market boomed. Pre-modern artistic practices were collectively structured (in workshops and through the guild system for example); it is not really until the modern period that we begin to see a narrowing of focus onto the individual maker, with the collective labour of the studio largely hidden. During this time, craft-based labour became divorced from that which we understand as art. This separation, Beech has argued, was the foundation of art's hostility to capitalism born out of the academies' distaste for the Guilds. The artisan began to be historically associated with the market and commercial interests, while art distanced itself from handicraft to avoid association with the market. (I will return to craft skills later in relation to Unzueta's practice).

In the eighteenth century, connoisseurship – which originated as a method of classification and authentication – further distanced those labouring for artists through establishing a canon in art. In attributing authorship and its associated valuation, connoisseurship was closely associated with the art market. In the twentieth century, formalist approaches to the study of Western art history were originally concerned with classification through employing, for example, a comparative method (Heinrich Wölfflin). Other formalist approaches placed emphasis on the individual viewer who engaged in aesthetic judgements of

beauty – for example, Clive Bell’s ‘aesthetic experience’ – or taste (apparent in Clement Greenberg’s criticism).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries fostered and hegemonized the Romantic mythology evident in art, philosophy and literature, a mutated version of which still prevails in the dominant understanding of artist. Coupled with an aesthetic philosophy that embraced individualism, art history did little to dissuade the understanding of the artist as a freethinking individual, set apart from the crowd. I’m recounting this history here because the continued understanding of artists as lone, mad, eccentrics persists into the 21st century. The 2007 Work Foundation report on the creative industries, based on government-funded research, provides an example. It states:

‘A culture that tolerates and embraces its deviants, heretics, eccentrics, crackpots, weirdos and good, old-fashioned original thinkers may enjoy payoffs in terms of economic performance.’

The mad, lone genius of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries becomes the (economically valuable) heretic or the crackpot in the twenty-first century. Within the transition from the late twentieth to early twentieth centuries we witness a deskilling of work and with the advent of neoliberalism – the contemporary period of capitalism emergent post-1979 – a shift to what is termed immaterial work. That is, a type of labour that does not produce an immaterial good but rather relies on skills in communication, affect and service, often employing the worker’s personality alongside their time. In short, neoliberalism embraced and commodified those who work like artists but only when put to work for capital.

So, to summarise so far: labour is central to capitalism, the economic system under which most contemporary artists currently work. And it is against this context – and that of art history - that I would like to approach Johanna Unzueta’s work. Unzueta’s practice engages and manifests labour in myriad ways, for example, that of the artist - and, by association, the hand - collaborators, handicraft and industrial production are all evident in the work

included in *Tools for Life*. In the remainder of this talk I will read Unzueta's work as subverting the typical relationship between the hand and the body in relation to labour, and the industrial, aligned with minimal art. I draw attention to her position as a Chilean female artist engaging with a minimal aesthetic, alongside her collaboration with makers and the craft-based skills employed in her practice. Finally, I consider Unzueta's practice as one that quietly – yet importantly - engages a politics of labour.

Let us start with the idea of the hand. There is so much at play in Unzueta's work. At first appearance it signifies a minimal aesthetic. On entering the gallery space, one cannot help but make visual connections between Robert Morris' felt pieces (and also the timber) and the large-scale chain (*Related to Myself*, 2019-20) taking centre stage in Gallery 1. The work nods to industry – with the inclusion of the chain, originally a labour-saving invention in the transition from hand-made to industrial production – while also using a material aligned with traditional craft – felt. However, the initial association with minimalism, I propose, is misleading; on closer inspection, the sculpture reveals the work's complexities. These complexities lie not only in the work itself but the processes adopted in making the pieces, in its labour.

Let us stay with this minimal aesthetic a while longer. The minimal art movement emerged in mid-1960s America, which was not really a movement but a labeling by critics. It was and still remains largely associated artists such as Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Donald Judd whose practice and writing in the pages of *Artforum* magazine helped to establish an understanding of this new object-making practice as one distinct from the high modernist painting that dominated the US art scene. During the 1960s and 70s the artist's hand that had re-emerged in relation to gesture in abstract modernist painting became less important in art making, gradually replaced with the concept or idea. It could be argued that minimal art bridged the gap between high modernism and conceptual art in its rejection of the hand. Both groups fought over Frank Stella.

The rejection of the hand took both an aesthetic and a practical form. The minimal objects adopted the appearance of industrial fabrication, utilizing

materials such as Cor-ten steel and employing (often un-acknowledged) industrial manufacturers, and contemporaneous large-scale art fabricators such as Lippincott Inc. and Carlson and Co. to make the works. In doing so, the hand of the artist became one step removed from the exhibited object, the work often the product of the skilled labour of others. *Related to Myself* similarly employs skilled labourers; the natural felt used in the work is manufactured by a family company founded over 200 years ago. We are told in the gallery notes that Unzueta sourced the felt as a 'mark of respect: acknowledging the time and skill required to make this type of material purely from natural resources.' Through this public acknowledgement, the labour of the felt-makers becomes an integral part of the work, decentering the artist's hand and recognizing the labour and skill of others. It also presents a juxtaposition between the labour-intensive process of felt making and the represented object – something aligned with the mechanization of production and everyday life. However, the artist is evident in other ways, something that the title of the work intimates.

In his 'Notes on Sculpture, Part Two', Robert Morris wrote that: 'The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object.' In his proposition, the viewer's body – human scale – becomes the measure against which objects are classified, from the ornament (small, intimate) to the monument (large-scale). To return to the *Related to Myself*, Unzueta uses her own body as the measure of scale for the links in the chain. Similarly, in her drawings she forgoes traditional measuring devices, using parts of her body in place of a tool. Unzueta is not the first female artist to use her body as a tool for measuring; the her early works the French performance artist Orlan used her body to measure space, referring to the measurement as an Orlan-body.

The use of the female artist's body as a measurement here is not something insignificant in a sculptural practice that uses the language of minimalism. It will come as no surprise that the most visible artists associated with minimal art were white men. As such, we might assume that Morris' human-scale is in relation to his own as a male viewer of sculpture. Through using her body as a measure of scale, Unzueta quietly subverts the reading,

inviting the viewer to see things in relation to the female artist's scale, while she is also embodied in the sculpture. The work itself dominates the gallery space, its gestalt a towering structure; however, the separate links common to most industrial machinery based on the body of the artist suggest an intimacy – an invitation to look closer - that I would argue is present throughout Unzueta's work. It also perhaps, signifies collaboration, something which is prevalent in the artist's own practice.

The artist's body – and those of others – is evident throughout works presented in the exhibition. Unzueta has stated that she sees her hands as tools. The use of her hand as instruments of work plays again with the visibility of labour in *My Tears Started a Rain/The Darkness of the Sea Open My Eyes* (2020). This work comprises of sculptures that look like industrial products – taps and pipework – found in most buildings. Look closer again, and the work reveals that it is made of felt, the stitching exposed at the edges of the pieces folded to create three-dimensional shapes. It is clear that the taps are hand-stitched, and this time it is revealed that the labour is undertaken by the hand of the artist. The work again invites the viewer closer. While the industrial manufactured aesthetic of minimal objects was often contracted out to factories and art fabricators, Unzueta returns the artist's labour via the hand to these works. She labours at each stage of this work's manufacture, from dying the felt, cutting the pattern and stitching it together by hand to create its three-dimensional form.

The taps might remind us of another work that employed everyday plumbing – Duchamp's *Fountain* - which infamously re-purposed an industrially-manufactured urinal as art by employing the signature of the artist (or a pseudonym R.Mutt). This is a work that is commonly cited as the originator of the deskilling of art, for example, in John Roberts' key book on deskilling after the Readymade *The Intangibilities of Form*. The peak of this deskilling was epitomized in the 1968 text 'The Dematerialisation of Art' written by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in which they stated:

'As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely

the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study.'

In this short citation the skilled labour of the craftsperson is distinguished from that of the artist. The former is aligned with manual skill, while the latter associated with the mental labour of conceptualizing art. Unzueta's contemporary practice crosses the boundaries of the two, conscientiously employing skilled labour, while also embedding the workers' practice into her conceptualization. To a viewer in the know the spectre of Duchamp's *Fountain* haunts the work through the recreation of everyday plumbing. But, again, we see the inversion of this canonical (dare I say mis-) use of labour; here, the labour is not industrial, nor anonymous but the skilled labour of the artist. The work is made by the female artist's hand. The duality of skill in the contemporary period - that of material and immaterial labour - are combined through these works.

The dematerialization of art in the mid-twentieth century followed a wider deskilling of work, particularly in the global north that marked a period of economic transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, or neoliberalism. We might also consider how with the first move to industrialisation, the effects of the invention of labour-saving machinery also signaled a transition from craft-based skill and production to one reliant upon technology. Of course, this technical advancement has not slowed as most of us now carry miniature computers in our pockets that connect us to the world. I should also note that globally the transitional phase between Fordism through to a neoliberal economy and ideology has developed unevenly. In the UK (and in the US) we have gradually seen industrial production decline as manufacturing has been relocated to countries in which the labour laws are less strict and workers' wages are lower. For someone who lives in Manchester the traces of the once-dominant industrial textiles industry remains within the city. This was a city built from the industrial revolution that witnessed its decline and re-built itself through aligning with immaterial labour. At the height of the industrial revolution, the industrial labour of the working classes was so prominent that Frederick Engels incorrectly predicted Manchester to be the site of the first Communist revolution.

I refer to labour in the factory and particularly that of textiles production as it is the subject of the solo film within the exhibition, titled *The Factory/La Fabrica* (2016-19). Like those in Manchester, the factory in question was established and presumably fully operable in the 19th century; however, the site of the titular factory is Chile, Unzueta's country of birth. The subject is the Bellavista Oveja Tomé – a textiles factory established in 1865. Projected onto a hanging textile screen, the film takes us through the factory floor past what appear to be abandoned machinery. The film slowly reveals the working factory. Wildlife appears – including sheep - and infiltrates the walls of the factory. We learn that the 'seemingly abandoned' factory is, in fact, still operating albeit on a diminished scale following its 2008 bankruptcy. What the viewer bears witness to is perhaps an ode to home-based industrial production - in its heyday, the factory produced 80% of Chile's wool textiles - preserving the history of the factory before its inevitable decline. Unzueta again balances bodily labour with that of industrial production.

This loss of domestic industry is, of course, a familiar within the development of globalization and the free market economy. The common narrative is of the re-location of manufacturing to the global south - including textiles production to countries such as Bangladesh and Vietnam - where labour is cheaper to employ by companies in search of increased profit. However, my thinking about what the film represents for this talk comes at a time in which the conditions of labour in clothing manufacture are prominent in the UK news. Amidst the Covid-19 outbreak, a Leicester-based clothing factory was discovered to be exploiting workers, paying them £3.50 per hour, much lower than the legal minimum wage. Furthermore, workers were said to be working in unsafe conditions with no masks or protective measures from the virus.

Avoiding sensationalism, Unzueta's *The Factory* quietly points to the politics of contemporary labour practices, particularly those tied to textiles production. While the factory in Tomé was established in the 19th century, it is a contemporary place of work. The balance between contemporary and historic – the use of analogue 8mm film, the focus on the degradation of the building – only to discover it is operable – plays with the idea of loss and nostalgia that is

felt with the disappearance of industry, in this instance one that is tied to a presumed domestic product – wool – signified by the sheep's appearance. I realize that, of course, my reading is inflected with my own personal connections as someone who grew up in the industrial north of England in a period in which industry was in decline. However, this connection to traditional laboring practices in the country in which the artist grew up (and other countries) is something that is present throughout Unzueta's oeuvre. The artist learned indigenous craft skills – such as working with plant dyes from a Mapuche woman in Chile and Antigua traditional dyeing techniques in Guatemala - to use in her works. The knowledge here is created through making. There is also a commitment to environmentalism and sustainability in these practices that could be another paper in itself. The practice of learning the indigenous skills is distinct from simply purchasing the dyes from the makers; there's a commitment to continuing and preserving traditional and indigenous knowledge that might return us to the idea of preservation suggested by the film.

Taught skills are also found very close to home in the skills and techniques that were passed on through Unzueta's family. The artist learnt to sew, embroidery and patternmaking from the women in her family, something which prevails in her work today. In addition to the collectivity adopted by artists in post-Dictatorship Chile in the absence of state arts funding, perhaps we might also read the collaboration that is foregrounded in much of the artist's practice as influenced by this early sharing of knowledge through collective making. In keeping with the idea of collaboration and the presence of others then, I wish to talk about one more work before I try to bring this talk to a conclusion. This is a work in which the artist's body is not the only one present: *A Garment for a Day*. The work comprises a series of handmade garments that represent worker's clothing. The visual language of work is again utilized in the workwear produced for this piece. The pieces of clothing hanging in the exhibition were tailored to the bodies of Modern Art Oxford gallery invigilators, which they wore on the opening night of the exhibition in February. For me this work is particularly significant in making visible another form of labour in the exhibition – the immaterial labour of the gallery invigilator.

This is a role that provides a service, rather than producing a material good such as the labour employed in a factory, and one in which the worker commonly performs invisibility. As Dom Rowland notes in their account of wearing one of the pieces: 'Usually whilst working in the gallery you can find yourself blending into the background as visitors are occupied with the artwork on display...' And this is part of the role: to be available for discussion but not to disrupt the viewing of art. This is also a type of work that is often precarious, temporary or voluntary. I don't know how many people here have worked as gallery invigilators, but it can be an isolating experience. During their *Building as Body* residency at Nottingham Contemporary, Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards – collectively Manual Labours - worked with gallery invigilators. The work produced was performative as the workers expressed physically their experience of work. It revealed that the role of the gallery invigilator was often quite physical (standing or sitting for long periods of time), lonely and silent. The assistants developed a series of body scores through which they could subtly communicate with their colleagues across the gallery space. Through Unzueta inviting the gallery invigilators to wear the garments – wearable sculpture – they are elevated to the status of artworks for the evening. To return to Dom Rowland's earlier cited statement, it concludes by adding 'but that's pretty hard to accomplish when you are displaying the artwork on your body.' Attention is drawn to the workers and, in turn, their laboring bodies. The workers are made visible for the evening.

This piece also returns us to think about the exploitation of the industrial textile worker. The title of the work - *A Garment for the Day* - alludes to fast-fashion and the piece is dedicated to Ellen Hotton and the invisible child labourers exploited in the global quest for cheaper production. [Include the quotation on the slide] In contrast to this exploitation, Unzueta engages in a practice of what I will call here considered outsourcing. The fabric used in the workwear is sourced from The New Denim Project, a project established by Iris Textiles in 1956. The denim is produced in a factory in Guatemala that employs a practice of upcycling. The project goes beyond recycling to employ what it terms a "'whole system' approach to the vast flow of resources and waste through human society. It redesigns the current, one-way

linear industrial system into a circular economy, and it is modelled on nature's successful strategies." (The New Denim Project) *A Garment for a Day*, which takes on the formal appearance of clothing hung on a rail, combines multiple aspects of labour: industrial, environmental, handcraft (the wooden buttons are handmade in Mexico), exploited global labour and the immaterial labour of the invigilator. By referencing the exploitation of child workers in the dedication while ethically sourcing the materials from which the garments are made, Unzueta shows us that another way is possible.

And this is a good work to finish on, as I feel that it epitomises the inherent relationship that this body of work has to labour. What appear to be formal sculptural arrangements on first appearance reveal themselves as complex musings on historic and contemporary labour. Let's return to the contrast with the minimal artists for a moment. These artists attempted to engage industrial labour (in some narratives as a way to escape the gesture of the artist's hand) in the mid-1960s by utilising the materials of industry and employing skilled industrial workers and fabricators, with some even performing the worker at times (Carl Andre). I reassert in this conclusion that to read works such as Unzueta's through this language misses the embodied complexity of the artist's practice. The artist subverts the performative minimal practice, with its anonymised employed industrial labour, through engaging her own labour and making visible the labour of others in her work. This making visible is important. It acknowledges those who are often marginalised in artistic practice and labour. Unzueta shows that the artist's hand, sometimes employing craft and indigenous skills – including those of others, and industrial production can exist alongside each other in the same work. Similarly, Unzueta successfully returns craft-based skills to fine art, which is no small task given the years of historic separation founded on elitism.

I began this talk by saying that there is a lot at play in the work of Johanna Unzueta and I hope that this has become clear through this short presentation. We might conclude by asking what does it mean to bring these diverse types of labour together in an artistic practice? I will offer a response, with the invitation for further discussion. In bringing these types of labour together, the work of Johanna Unzueta signifies an important considered

(might I add poetic?) practice that is infused with the politics of labour. I say infused as the political aspects of her work are not loud and extroverted - a device commonly adopted in contemporary political practice -, nor are they always obvious on the surface of the work. However, these political elements – the visibility of labour and a commitment to environmental and ethical practices of making – are integral to the work, part of its material and its making. As such, the work embodies knowledge and invites the viewer to learn. I end by asking everyone to step a little closer, to look again, at the work of Johanna Unzueta.

Thank you.