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Hit the Lights on Your Way Out

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Hit the Lights on Your Way Out

by

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Abstract

Artifacts of industry remain scattered throughout the American rustbelt. A region built and reliant upon manufacturing, destined to fail when companies found themselves in jeopardy. Jobs came and went, businesses folded. What remains in their place are vacant factories, warehouses, and the workforce itself.

This area of the country is where my life began and where I have found myself once again. Growing up in Erie, Pennsylvania, part of a family that endured this cycle of ups and downs, I have a certain familiarity and fondness for this post-industrial landscape and its inherent struggles.

"Hit the Lights on Your Way Out" is an examination of the volatile relationship between a region and the industry that supports it. The objects in this body of work investigate aspects of ritual, loyalty, and value – and the speed at which those things begin to lose meaning.

Discussion of Research

Throughout the course of my thesis investigation, I found myself frequently encountering failure and uncertainty. In an effort to avoid leaving stones unturned, I consulted sources addressing these dilemmas for latent potential.

Preceding my thesis work, I completed a side table titled *Console*. The piece combines several disparate components – one of which was a grid of intersecting segments leftover from a previous, unsuccessful build. Determining the success of a piece of furniture was seemingly straightforward to me, having visual appeal and addressing the user's needs appropriately. In the final stages of assembling the originating form, I realized something was not working compositionally. Rather than trashing the piece, I shelved it and moved onward, assuming its failure.

Console, maple, glass (2020) 16" × 16" × 20"

Upon recommendation, I delved into Jack Halberstam's book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, which affirms the subjective nature of success. While this book ultimately criticizes capitalism and it's heteronormative landscape, it presents insight about recontextualizing preconceived failure.[1]

> "We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities."

This perspective reframed my outlook, subsequently redefining my criteria when gauging the outcome of my work. The acknowledgment of failure is not absolute; instead, it is a chance for reevaluation and adaptation. This opportunity influenced my recycling of components into what became *Console*, and eventually would assist me at several junctures within the body of my thesis.

Gathering a visual library, I stumbled into the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher – specifically, their book Grain Elevators. This book is an assortment of photographs that offers numerous examples of these structures in North America and Europe.[2] The Bechers' photography was always in black and white, falling within the scope of 'documentary.' Depicting so much more than just industrial structures, the absence of color coupled with this subject matter captures the gravity of emotion that looms over this environment.

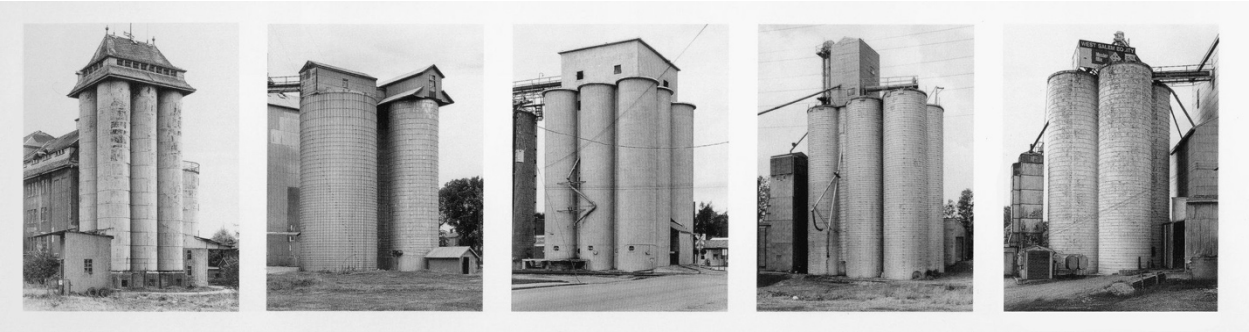


Figure 1: Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Grain Elevators* (2020)

Much of the visual experience growing up in Erie, Pennsylvania involved interacting with industrial artifacts. Often greeted by singular buildings or even entire city blocks made up of

abandoned factories and warehouses. Remnants left behind from a time of former use. Having a familiarity with the rustbelt, home to many of these buildings, I found Bernd and Hilla's collection to be an honest representation of the character and feelings this region exudes. They capture a forgotten state, showcasing the lifelessness imbued within its architecture.

Informing much of my thesis was anecdotal evidence accrued through conversation and experience. I investigated my own familial dynamics in the wake of job loss and economic struggle. Throughout the development of these concepts I was mining, I sat with my parents individually to discuss their recollections of this experience.

Body of Work

Within the presentation of my thesis body of work, viewers first encountered a wall-hung reliquary titled, *Hourly Rate*. The decision to place this piece at the exhibition's forefront was informed considering the gallery space, the contents inside the cabinet, and the desire to set a thematic tone for the installation.

Hourly Rate, wood, found objects, handmade paper (2021) – day shift (L), night shift (R) 22" × 10" × 38"

Housed within this case piece is a functioning timeclock, mounted centrally, capped on either side by racks of timecards within the cavities of its doors. As the work and concepts driving it developed, time emerged as a significant factor serving as a throughline. In practice, woodworking is an inherently repetitive and time-consuming craft, attributes amplified by the processes I employed. Along the way, there were moments when I found myself head down, executing monotonous procedures for hours in my studio – shining a light on the parallels between this repetitive cycle and the day in, day out routine of employment in the rustbelt. With this realization and not yet knowing how to apply this information, I began logging daily –

recording details like my time spent in the studio and the start and end times when executing certain operations.

Creating this new ritual of timekeeping left me with pages of data, a hard copy outlining my daily efforts. This habit was the impetus that led to the search and acquisition of a timeclock. This object eventually proved to be a red herring, an essential piece to the puzzle, but not the primary focus I had initially anticipated.

Hourly Rate, wood, found objects, handmade paper (2021) 22" × 10" × 38"

If not for the timeclock in tandem with the repetitive act of documenting my own time, I would not have recognized the significance of a timecard. A weekly, physical record of labor directly corresponding to one's compensation, routinely used, then discarded. These forms are of everyday use within industries, representing so much to many – conveying an individual's value in the eyes of an employer. With this realization, I then explored the potential of a timecard.

For this next endeavor, I was fortunate enough to enlist the guidance of a relative who is a papermaker. In brief, papermaking involves shredding and pulping a fibrous material, saturating the material in vats of water, pulling sheets using a screen, and finally drying the paper. Learning these paper production methods allowed me to experiment and ultimately create a substrate imbued with personal history. I began by sitting with my mother and sorting through decades of

my parent's files – paystubs, taxes, bills, etc., resulting in boxes of various papers detailing about forty years of industrial and economic struggle. This collection was then shredded and pulped in a manner that allowed moments of the original documents to remain intact. I ultimately produced a literal paper trail. A record-keeping tool, tracking an employee's weekly worth, comprised using evidence of the employer's aftermath.

Hourly Rate, wood, found objects, handmade paper (2021) 22" × 10" × 38"

The final composition of these elements manifested in a reliquary, attempting to mimic the presence and stature of a religious tabernacle. I sought to design a home for these items to elevate their significance from the ordinary to something much more sacred while also capturing the story of the tail end of my father's employment at the American Sterilizer Company. His role was in maintenance, well-versed in the wide range of machinery and their respective nuances. In 2007, the company announced that it would be terminating their operations in Erie, Pennsylvania, and relocating manufacturing abroad. As time progressed, the company began laying off departments systematically, slowly nixing employees whose roles were now deemed nonessential. In recalling these memories, my father refers to being the one to "hit the lights"

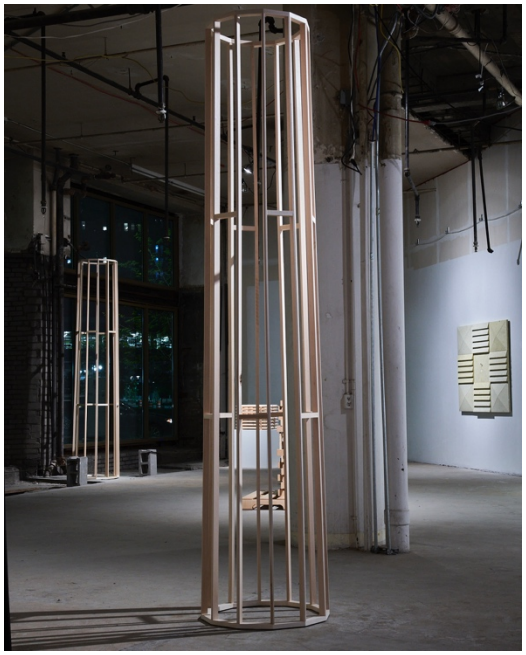
before closing the doors the final time. He was of the last skeleton crew still employed, tasked with stripping the facilities of their contents. Hearing recollections of this period over the years has left me feeling uneasy, as this dismal environment devolved into nothing. The cabinet doors of *Hourly Rate* aim to depict this transition. The left holds four timecards, representing those last few devotees, still on the clock despite the writing on the wall. While on the right, timecards are overflowing for those who have clocked out their final shift.

Pivoting from my initial proposal of furniture pieces towards this body of work meant also embracing new methods of creation and ideation. As a furniture maker, functionality had been the focal point of my portfolio. While I maintain a deep love for designing around the user, I have grown comfortable working within a particular scale. So, when I recognized that same trend starting to appear within the production of my thesis, I took it as an opportunity to force myself outside that comfort zone and go bigger.

Coming/Going, cheaper wood (2021) 24" × 24" × 122"

Coming/Going is the result of that impulse. With these two identical, towering structures, I sought to mine conceptual parallels between historical and modern-day monuments. The form stems from smokestacks – an ordinary, unavoidable sight protruding from the skylines of cities in the rustbelt.

The smokestacks I regularly encounter in Erie, Pennsylvania, and Rochester, New York, are remnants of now-defunct corporations. Typically found paired with vacant buildings or adjacent to vacant lots, where similar structures once stood. In either scenario, the common denominator is an uninhabited setting. This was the thread that connected their likeness to ancient markers like columns and obelisks.



Coming/Going, cheaper wood (2021) 24" × 24" × 122"

Civilizations throughout the history of humankind have employed obelisks to pay homage to various forms of power and devotion. For example, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman empires are all observed utilizing monoliths like these to symbolize and, in some cases, immortalize. Some pay reverence to a god or depict battle stories, but what I found most compelling was the marking of one's reign over a nation. Much like the lasting impression of a past ruler, I liken smokestacks to these obelisks, signifying an industry's lasting effects over a region that once relied upon it.

For the fabrication of *Coming/Going*, I wanted to create an implied volume, emulating the appearance of studded walls used in construction. I see a framed structure as a suggestive sight, residing in a state of flux. The form appears as a sign of growth, something new to come, while

in certain environments it appears as a sign of decline, something on its way out. Utilizing basswood, I created a system of dimensional lumber acting as "studs" to capture this moment of ambiguity.

Examining the facets of a career within the industrial setting motivated much of my interest in developing this work. However, what takes place between clock-in and clock-out is only half of the story. For the individual, in this case my father, the monotony begins and ends at home. Investigating this experience, I began thinking about the repetition of one's daily routine mixed in with the repetition brought on by the start of the workday – waking up to the sound of the same alarm, the smell of the same coffee, leading up to the same walk out the door each morning. Daily reproductions of this sensory experience become mundane. It begins to produce a disorienting sense of déjà vu, causing days and weeks to blend together, ultimately arriving at complacency.

As autumn was transitioning to winter in 2020, I found myself at a crossroads in developing the themes and narratives that would eventually manifest in this body of work. I was back home in Erie, when I felt the impulse to visit what once housed the American Sterilizer Company, my father's place of employment for 17 years. The site in question comprises a handful of buildings, each outfitted for their specified stages of machining. At the time of the visit, these structures were still intact but had been lying dormant for well over a decade. My hope for this outing was purely investigative, searching for a better understanding of these everyday occurrences.

The day I ventured across town for this visit was a quintessential, late-November day for the Great Lakes region. Gray skies, a bite in the air, and heavy, wet snowfall. Having spent most of my winters here, I had not given it much thought then, but now recounting this moment, these dreary conditions were all too fitting. Upon arrival, I parked and proceeded to walk the perimeter of the building, the route one would take on their way in and out of work. In doing so, I suppose I was attempting to evoke my father's perspective, taking note of the facility's visual features. What caught my eye was a sequence of repeating panels outlining the facade of this edifice – a cross-broken duct panel and a vent. Familiar forms with identical dimensions, alternating routinely, creating a rhythm to the rather bleak structure.

Figure 2: Found exterior panels – AMSCO (Erie, PA)

Extracting this pattern, I began ruminating about the role this would play in one's routine, or if it even would at all. This notion was my point of entry for *Mile Markers*. The resulting piece is a wall-hung composition of nine panels – employing more of the same handmade paper produced with my parent's documents. Bordering this rectangle are eight panels mirroring the shapes and repetition adorning the facade of the American Sterilizer building. Four vents and four ducting panels alternate around the perimeter.

Mile Markers, paystubs, taxes, bills, etc. (late 80's - 2021) 66" × 54" × 3"

While considering this physical repetition accompanied by the performative repetition of one's day, I was reminded of a cosmetic feature within my parent's home that connected these disparate ideas. Families and relationships demand a lot of the parties involved. When outside stressors are present and persistent, these variables add unnecessary pressures to an already complicated dynamic. When I was a child, I recall a disagreement between my mother and father that ultimately resulted in a fist-shaped hole through the drywall in their kitchen.

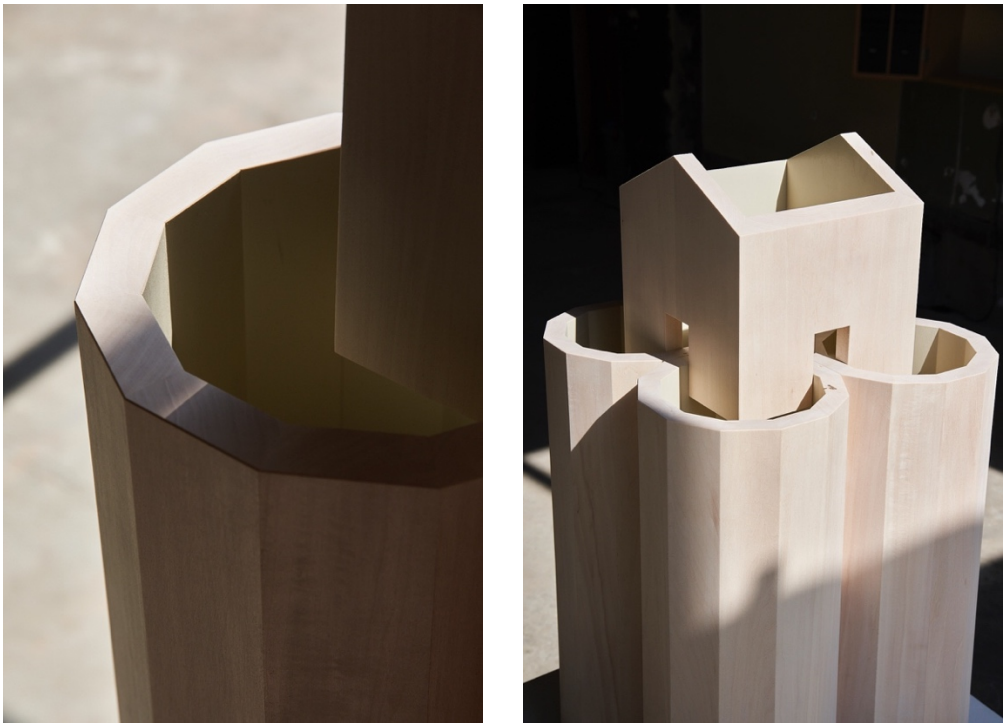
Seeing as the hole in the wall had been patched long ago, what remains in its place is a faint scar on the surface. While it is not glaringly obvious to passersby, it is recognizable to someone familiar with the occurrence or who frequents the space. This blemish fades into the background, not actively catching eyes or occupying headspace but not entirely immune to it either. Finding these qualities surprisingly congruent to those observed lining the exterior of my father's former workplace, I designed the central panel as the focal point of *Mile Markers* referencing this void.

Mile Markers, paystubs, taxes, bills, etc. (late 80's - 2021) 66" × 54" × 3"

As a regular in that kitchen, I clocked many hours occupying its space, absorbing the emotional weight of that broken drywall. I now see these household imperfections as evidence of when adversities get the best of their recipients. Growing up and living within those walls, I did not have that same sentiment. My feelings towards it were of fear and embarrassment, seeing this as a shameful act of aggression. But I was naïve. I lacked the knowledge and experience to grasp the situation entirely. Punching a hole in the wall was not an act of blind rage, rather the residue of a human at a breaking point.

Studying common industrial forms within the rustbelt, I kept finding myself returning to grain elevators. These towering structures are a common sight in this region and were the point of origin for three connected pieces depicting a story of production, decline, and severance.

The first of this grouping titled, *Dependents*, is a simplified recreation of a grain elevator. Across the wide range of examples, what struck me was that each building possessed unique characteristics and details, all while the primary forms they are composed of are relatively uniform. I observed within these forms a square structure, commonly with a pitched roof, above a grouping of massive silos. This combination of parts stood out to me as an odd pairing; however, personifying them within the frame of the industry led to exciting discoveries and commentary on their respective roles.



Dependents, cheaper wood (2020) 17" × 17" × 36"

The square structure with pitched roofs mounted atop drew a striking resemblance to the standardized shape of a home, while beneath stood a group of mammoth cylinders. What I saw was the homelife and industry united together in one complete form – an intersection that

showcases the apparent, toxic relationship between the two. While this sequence within the structure serves a specific function, it also depicts what I have witnessed play out; that the homelife is directly reliant upon an industry's presence.

The fabrication of *Dependents* entailed four coopered tubes joined together vertically to mimic their silos. The construction of a coopered form is a repetitive process, beginning by producing a series of staves with angled edges to be joined together, outlining the circumference of the tubes. To maintain control of the variables while bringing these parts together, I engineered a system of jigs using modeling software and a CNC.

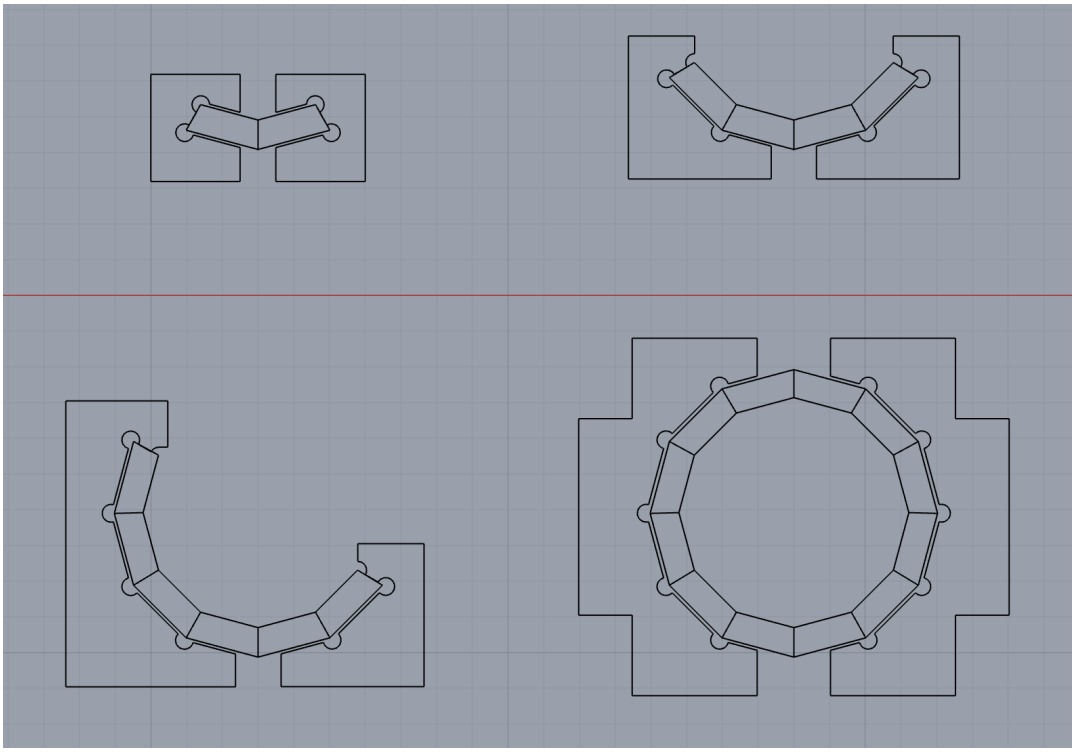


Figure 3: Illustration of jig sequence

The function of these fixtures is to hold each component in position, ensuring an adequate clamping pressure when gluing. The assembly is an additive process, so the system required a design that allowed adaptation to parts as they accumulated throughout the course. These jigs bring staves together sequentially, one to one, two to two, two to four, leading to six-sided halves that were finally merged in pairs resulting in twelve-sided cylinders.

Figure 4: Assembly Line

Each piece generated brought along inadvertent byproducts in the form of new perspectives and conceptual applications, and this was evident with the completion of *Dependents*. From this vantage, the final form, directly referencing a processing facility, represents a volatile relationship and the appearance of an active business from the outside. This exterior view omits what occurs within.

In contrast, *Holding Pattern* intentionally juxtaposes *Dependents* compositionally as well as in the gallery space. Representing the workforce, it is an assemblage of like components from its partnering piece. Leaving this collection of parts deconstructed, I am drawing a metaphor between what literally and figuratively makes up a functioning industry.

Designing and arranging a system for numerous, identical objects, I looked to the installations of Walter de Maria. Works such as *360° I Ching*, *The Broken Kilometer*, and *The 2000 Sculpture* served as useful fodder when considering the spatial organization of these components.

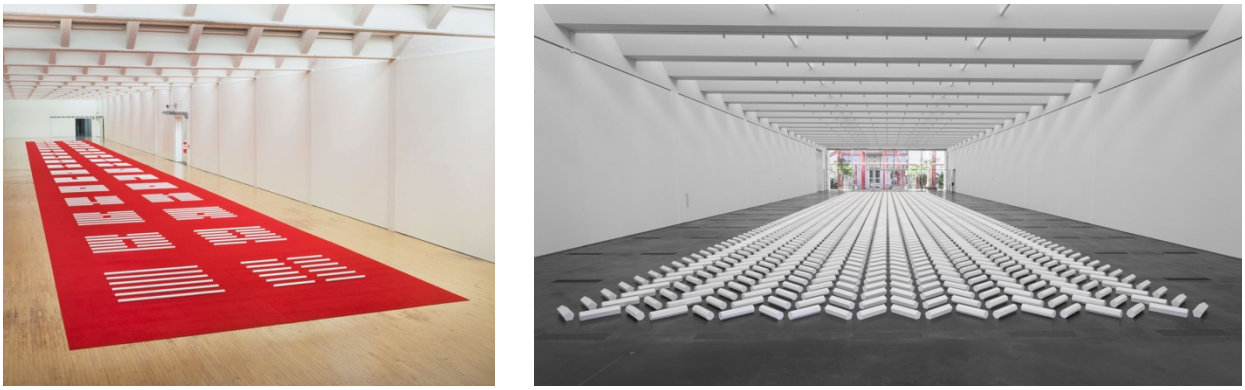
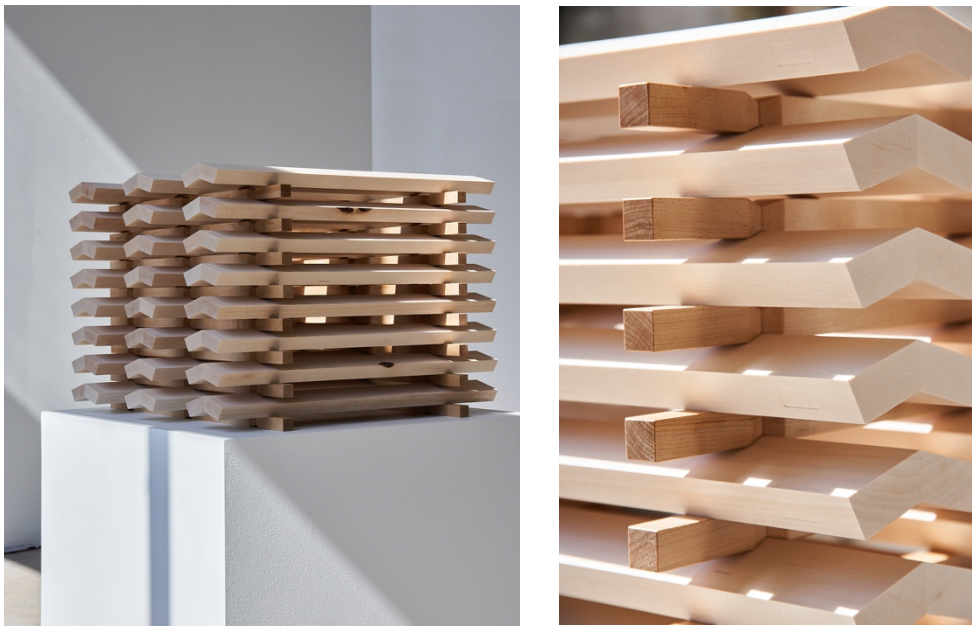


Figure 5: Walter de Maria, *360° I Ching/64 Sculptures* (left) – *The 2000 Sculpture (right)*

Additionally, the stacking within the piece was derived from stickering lumber – a common practice within woodworking where narrow strips of wood are laid between boards when drying and again when easing wood as it acclimates through the milling process. This procedure allows airflow on all sides of the board in hopes of yielding a stable workpiece.



Holding Pattern, wood, cheaper wood (2021) 18" × 22" × 20"

Much like the usage of jigs, stickers are similar in function – auxiliary elements used to maintain and manipulate control. Redefining the role of these items along the terms set by this body of work, I unearthed a clear link to the lingering feelings of those affected by temperamental employment. Assembling the staves in a stacked fashion was an effort to comment on the supply and demand of labor. While the completed form of *Dependents* is a seemingly beautiful object, representing a thriving company, when distilled down to its elemental features in *Holding Pattern*, you see a surplus of parts representing the replaceability of labor.

The third piece that bookends this lineage of production, decline, and severance, titled *Shift Change*, focuses primarily on the aspect of severance. Revisiting my father's recollection of his final days at the American Sterilizer Company, *Shift Change* examines this experience through

the scope of the themes at play. Likening jigs to the machinery and materials used in manufacturing, I sought to emulate the ordered dismemberment of facilities as they prepared them for relocation.

Shift Change, wood, engineered wood (2021) 42" × 48" × 48"

Drawing inspiration from routine shipping and receiving, along with the notion of an industry leaving town, led me to the pallet – a familiar object and a vessel for items in transit. Assembling jigs precariously atop this bespoke pallet was not only a way for me to showcase the byproducts of my build processes. It also served as a performative act, allowing me to tap into a similar mentality of those remaining workers, like my father.

While *Hourly Rate* and *Shift Change* are drawing from the same slice of life, both address a different facet of worth in moments of change. The former depicts a tangible expiration of one's value, while the latter portrays where that value truly lies. I was equally intrigued as I was heartbroken by this awareness. Someone devoting years, in most cases decades, to a company

realizing the items they are stripping from these buildings get to live on, continuing their career while theirs is tapering to an end.

Material selection was intentional and a new approach I found for applying meaningfulness to work. Alternating between basswood and quarter-sawn maple for much of this work was an effort to comment on perceived value using localized qualities within woodworking. My attraction to basswood was based initially on appearance, bland and unassuming, with visual similarities to dimensional lumber used in construction. The more I worked with it, the more thematic connections I saw, making it suitable for staves representing the workforce.

Although it is a hardwood, it is on the softer side, showing evidence of wear and tear across its surfaces. Basswood is an affordable and cheaper wood, easily procured and just as easily replaced. These characteristics mirror many of those I observed when investigating the residual feelings leftover after layoffs.

Shift Change, wood, engineered wood (2021)
42" × 48" × 48"

Holding Pattern, wood, cheaper wood (2021)
18" × 22" × 20"

The use of quarter-sawn maple within *Holding Pattern* and *Shift Change* was similarly motivated. This hardwood is very dense in comparison and is also a very stable material. Additionally, in contrast to basswood, quarter-sawn maple is higher quality wood, having more visual appeal and a higher cost. In these two pieces, I used maple to create stickers and a pallet, respectively. In practice, these articles are not fabricated from anything special, typically scrap wood of lesser quality. Using a finer wood like this for their construction was an effort to flip the notion of value, elevating these devices, holding or carrying objects of momentary importance.

Conclusion

My first attempts to examine physical structures served as a catalyst and motivated me to look further in an effort to discover what was buried within their walls. Deviation and reconciliation were two concepts that I did not expect to unearth. As a self-diagnosed stubborn person, I was at first challenged to welcome those ideas. I had anticipated already knowing the course I would follow as my work unfolded, leaning into something less certain.

Reflecting on my own personal and familial history with struggle was unfamiliar territory in the context of my work. It was new to me in general, as investigating this subject was an uneasy endeavor. It involved rehashing complicated and tense memories of hardship with those who endured them. I did not expect this mining to take shape within my work with the level of catharsis and appreciation that I experienced. Total immersion in an examination of the past, with first-hand testimony, shed light on the gaps in my memory that led to unexpected discoveries. From the outside looking in, the lapse in time between then and now gave me life experience and perspective. It left me better equipped to understand the prevailing themes and undertake the research that led to this thesis.

The resulting body of work aggregated profound realizations about my studio practice and the potential for meaningful connection to my personal history. In a way, I had been following in my father's footsteps, recognizing that I had fallen into a similarly monotonous pattern. I cultivated a devotion to remaining within a comfortable range of utilitarian work. Devotion gradually transformed into reliance, thus truncating my work's potential.

The development and execution of this thesis pushed me and, by extension, my work well outside any semblance of comfort. This process presented me with unexpected opportunities to deviate and dive deeper into moments of substance not previously possible. Embracing the unknown has been a persistent notion within my graduate studies. These opportunities allowed me to depart from the point of origin and assume a new course of action.

As a piece took shape, achieving a flow state became a primary goal for my studio practice as I explored this new way of working. This rhythm of having set objectives and then actively engaging in the work to accomplish these goals gave me focus while also providing me the capacity to contemplate the development of this work and process. Were it not for this mental space, I may not have fully realized or appreciated the journey within my practice. It gave me a new perspective on the obsessive tendencies I apply to the way that I approach making – typically resulting in over-engineered jigs and fixtures, aiding the production of a final piece. While in practice, they may only be required temporarily for a specific function, I found that my attention to and obsession with these objects stems from a deeper seeded connection to production. A connection that emerged to be just as meaningful to the work as the objects these jigs were intended to facilitate.

Working conceptually in this way was entirely new territory to me. The decision to look at making through a new lens and abandon the familiarity of designing around utility was a difficult one to make but proved to be invaluably beneficial. The outcome of this effort presented my family and me with solace when experiencing the finished collection of pieces.

This perception of solace came as a response to redefining not only the past but also the future. Engaging in this work, I have realized that I no longer needed to confine myself to work within certain self-imposed limitations. It is hard to say how my ideas will manifest moving forward between working functionally and conceptually, but I am not too concerned. Simply realizing that I can work in such a way is sufficient. This awareness has shown me that there is just as much a comfort in knowing one's abilities as there is in not knowing where they will take you. For me, that is enough to keep the lights on.

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Photography Credits

Lamark, Elizabeth. 2020

Console

Semler, Scott. 2021

Coming/Going

Dependents

Holding Pattern

Hourly Rate

Mile Markers

Shift Change

Image Description

1. Console, maple, glass, 2020 16" × 16" × 20"
2. Console, detail
3. Hourly Rate, wood, found objects, handmade paper, 2021 – day shift 22" × 10" × 38"
4. Hourly Rate – night shift
5. Hourly Rate, detail – timeclock
6. Hourly Rate, detail – timecard
7. Hourly Rate, detail – closed
8. Coming/Going (1 of 2), cheaper wood, 2021 24" × 24" × 122"
9. Coming/Going (2 of 2)
10. Coming/Going, detail – top
11. Coming/Going, installation view
12. Mile Markers, paystubs, taxes, bills, etc., late 80's-2021 66" × 54" × 3"
13. Mile Markers, detail – surface
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15. Dependents, detail
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17. Holding Pattern, wood, cheaper wood, 2021 18" × 22" × 20"
18. Holding Pattern, detail – stack
19. Shift Change, wood, engineered wood, 2021 42" × 48" × 48"
20. Shift Change, detail – pallet
21. Holding Pattern, detail – top

Figure Description

1. *Grain Elevators*, Bernd and Hilla Becher. 2006
2. Found exterior panels, American Sterilizer Company (AMSCO). Erie, PA
3. Illustration of engineered jigs, Robert McNeel & Associates. Rhinoceros
4. Image of assembly
5. *360° I Ching/64 Sculptures* and *The 2000 Sculpture,* Walter de Maria. 1981 and 1992