

WORK IN PROGRESS: AN ACCUMULATION OF  
EXPERIENCE

by

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In Greece, the summer of 2016, I engaged in an art project that completely altered the way that I viewed art. There is a process for all art created, but often that process is swept aside in favor of presenting a finished piece. How then does knowing the labor that goes into a piece change the evaluation of the product? When does the labor become the art itself?

This thesis is a two year retrospective of work and ideas that engages in concepts of mass, accumulation and labor. The synthesis of two years of research led to a performance piece titled *Work in Progress*, a showcase and reminder of the labor unseen in daily rituals. The way we value things is greatly affected by the way they are produced, which highlights the contrast between the craft of an individual and the efficiency of industrialized production. Art exists as an illogical commitment, characterized by the efforts of many asserting that it has some place in the world. My assertion is that the labor of making can be an artistic process. If a product is valued because of the labor accumulated, I see no reason why the labor itself cannot be valued to the same extent as the physical byproduct.

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## On a Beach in Spetses

On July 7th of 2016 I stood up after placing the final stone of a three day project on a beach in Spetses, Greece.



Figure 1.1: "Untitled" stones on the sand

I had scouted the beach out the first day we arrived on the island. It was a small beach, and was on the way to the inn we were staying at from the port. Despite its size, the beach was quite popular. Adjacent to the residencies, locals were always present. In the morning, the elderly would go out for morning swims, their heads bobbing in and out of view with the waves; and in the afternoon and evenings, it was a popular spot for children. The road that curved around it circled the entire island and was accustomed to the little traffic that the island had, locals and tourists that passed by on a consistent basis. We stayed on Spetses for about a week and we passed by the beach everyday. I swam there every morning.

## **Beginnings**

In the Summer of 2016, I had the opportunity to travel to Greece for a three week intensive art program. It focused on immersing students into the history and culture of Greece, allowing the freedom to pursue our own specific interests. Our only parameters were to keep a daily travel log and conduct a project by the end of our session. Our first week was spent in Athens, visiting most of the major monuments and speaking with local vendors and artists. The second week was spent on Spetses and was designated for ideation and work. This is where I conducted my project.

In preparation for my study abroad, I wanted to make myself a blank slate; to be open to anything and everything that came my way and have the flexibility to do so. To me, this was about minimizing my travel load. Three changes of clothes, my phone, wallet, pen and sketchbook were all that accompanied me and fit snug in a single bag. The intent was to clear my mind of any preconceived projects and let whatever came to be in Greece, do so organically. Any art supplies I would utilize would be acquired in Greece.

By the time we arrived in Spetses, I had received a crash course in Greek history, mythology, cuisine and language; my mind was full of monuments and gods. During this time I had recorded a collection of sketches. Designs and concepts were acquired at every museum and landmark we visited. Intricate details of pottery and the calculated architecture of monuments were all documented as references for any potential projects. After that first week, the earth had become my main medium of interest. The designs and material of Greece created a sense of cohesion. The same materials found in the tools and monuments of Ancient Greece were still being used in



modern contexts. It became clear that the use of limestone, clay and other materials was more than a utilization of convenience, but rather a cultural decision. The landscape seemed to reflect the land in its design and material. So when we arrived on the streets of Spetses, one thing immediately stood out to me, I could feel it under my feet.



Figure 1.2: Pebblework in the courtyard of the House of Bouboulina

Sections and entire streets were laid out with intricate pebblework, the stones seemingly sourced from the island itself. The designs showcased an intentional and labor intensive process. The fact that each of the stones never overlapped inferred on the time that was dedicated to each street. I planned to take part in the process of pebblework, or at least recreate it using designs and motifs I had collected in my first week in Athens. It was



only a matter of time that I found a beach with the suitable materials and space to start working.

I started by myself, using what I could find on the beach. I used twine, a metal stake and an old lemon grater to set the center of the circle, which would allow me to draw a perfect circle like a compass. An old plastic bag was used to collect and organize different stones, and then it was on to the matter of placing them. Labor is something that cannot be quantified without previous experience, and while it can be something made relative, I did not have the experience at the time to prepare me for what would become almost twenty hours amongst the rocks. There was energy in being somewhere new and doing something exciting, but at a certain point fatigue and monotony set in and I began to question whether or not the project was worth doing. But, as with any kind of work, I had committed to completing the piece to a point that I could access the scale and potential of the piece. This was not only to set a more realistic goal, but to establish visual proof of intent. It became very apparent once I started that I would not be able to finish in a single sitting, so I needed to find some way to keep the project from being tampered with between sessions. To this end I decided to complete a few rings in the design. I felt that was enough to distinguish the piece from simple "beach play" to something with design and purpose. I had accrued the help of some of my travel companions at this point, but after laying down the stone rings we began to get more attention.

The first to show interest were the children. After the first couple of rings were set, a few children playing on the beach began to take notice of us. They would come close, take a look and walk away. They did this until I extended an invitation to help. I

could barely speak Greek and they knew some English, but one thing led to another and we gained the help of the locals. Looking back, I realized that I had taken their play area and if they did not intend to expel us, they would at least take part in the activity. When we came back for our second session more children were waiting to help. In the mornings, the elderly that came out to swim helped too. We were treated to breakfast, drinks and met so many people in the process. Every time I think of the experience, I recall a new interaction I had with a stranger. We had gained the assistance of more than forty people. With their help I developed new designs, created more efficient means of working and gained a better understanding of their lives and culture. It would not have been nearly as successful without them.

In the end, I could not claim ownership over the piece. To contend with the amount of hands we had, I had to modify our production methods. I created ways for people who could not understand what I was saying, to understand how they could take part. It grew so quickly and organically that there was no way it could have existed with my influence alone. It was a bit of a surreal experience, it was a "pure" collaboration, something that I still have trouble explaining two years after.



Figure 1.3: "Bill"

Outlines and piles were made for people to fill and collect. Additional lines were attached to the pole to allow for more accurate and consistent measurements.

The images of the project usually illicit responses of amusement and remarks of how "cool" it is, but they could never fully show what the piece was, or rather what an experience it was. This difficulty in translating an experience through words and imagery lies at the crux of what spurred my research into the subject of art. Something about the whole process, the tactile sensations and the interactions with people, created a sense of fulfillment in my human experience. It seemed like it had a deeper meaning. With this in mind, I began to pursue a way to distill that experience and replicate it in better hopes of understanding it.

While some may have pursued methods in psychology or chemistry, I turned to research in the art field. This thesis is a record of that investigation.

## **Art: Problem Solving through Creation**

Speaking about investigating experience through science and sociology, I believe that certain things exist outside of quantifiable terms. It is in these situations that I turn to art, problem solving with alternative means. In order to understand how my experience in Greece could be quantified and explained through art, this thesis begins with a discussion of terms. Art is subjective. It can be interpreted and executed in a myriad of ways. I grew up with a rudimentary understanding of art. Finger painting and coloring were common practices in school and home, and I had the good fortune of frequenting museums at a young age. I related art mostly to paintings. Monet, Van Gogh and Leonardo Da Vinci were notable names at the time. While this is not an incorrect definition of art, it lacks the full breath of what art can be and did not accurately describe my Greek project. It was not until my first years in university that I would formally continue my art education, but it built enough foundation so that by the time I arrived in Greece, I at least had some means of interpreting my art.

In 1928 French artist René Magritte created the oil painting *The Treachery of Images* or *This is Not a Pipe*. It was created as a meta-cognizant piece that sought to show that an image and label are not necessarily analogues of what they portray. I use this piece as a foundation for breaking down how art is traditionally digested. The basic premise of this piece is what the name implies. This is not a pipe, but instead a painting of a pipe. Now it could be further extrapolated to say that this is not a pipe, but rather a potentially printed image, of a digital rendering, of a photo, of a painting of a pipe.



Figure 2.1 *The Treachery of Images* or *This is Not a Pipe*<sup>1</sup>

There is another element to simply viewing art. This kind of art evokes participation from the viewer. It relies on interaction in order to be effective. It was art that required new language in order to digest it. Magritte's piece cannot be taken at surface value; it "makes meaning" in that it requires a conversation of sorts with its viewers. It asks, "What am I?", but does not offer a perfect answer. While this is not an accurate representation of my piece in Greece, it begins to set the tone for how art can be constructed. Art can be made with a question in mind; it can be art driven by an idea rather than visual representation.

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<sup>1</sup>René Magritte. *The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)*. 1929. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California



## Conceptual Art

My project in Greece is best defined as conceptual art. It was a movement with origins in 1960-70, that emphasized ideas over work, and can be exemplified by a quote by artist Sol Lewitt:

Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical .... the words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept. -Sol Lewitt, 1969<sup>2</sup>

The Conceptual art movement started focusing more on interaction with intent rather than the physical production of art. It opened possibilities for what art could physically be, because the production no longer relied on technical skill. This meant that anyone could create art, it was no longer a practice strictly defined by a devotion to craft, but rather a desire to think and problem solve. While craft and labor are still integral to the art making process, they become secondary to the reasons of why they are done in the first place. In this way the process of making, even the ideation of making, could have equal if not more value than the physical result. While this resulted in a huge variety of art forms, at their core they all share the fundamental ideology that the material form of the piece is secondary to the ideation.

A year after my Summer in Greece, this is the category of art that I felt best fit the experience. While the work in Spetses was mostly material, the finished product was never the intent, it was only a means of creating a closed experience. The point of the project was to determine what I could learn from the process. It was the intent of the piece that is what differentiated it from child's play or the pebbled streets of Spetses itself. However, it was the spontaneity of the process that has left things to consider. In

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<sup>2</sup> Sol Lewitt, Sentences on Conceptual Art. New York, 1969: Sentences 10 and 14.

deliberating the specific ideologies behind my Greek piece was the idea of ephemera, which I divided into more specific concepts.

### *Gesture*

To me, the process of making in Greece was about relinquishing control. In many ways the construction of the project was regulated, but the rules of regulation had agency besides my own. In these rules, there were physical interactions that took place. In order to show strangers where to place stones without speaking, I used gestures and created rules that could be followed intuitively. Literally, a gesture is a movement that expresses an idea or response; or something that expresses an idea or attitude. Though, it was not just the physical gestures that held significance, but the symbolic ones as well. To me gestures referred to the human interactions in the process and were an integral part of the piece. One gesture that is relevant is the practice of gift-giving.

The concept of a gift is not a foreign one, it refers to physical objects or sentiments being passed from one to another. I feel presumptuous in saying that my piece in Greece was a gift to Spetses, but in a way it was. One of the major components of gift giving is the passing of ownership. Possession must be relinquished by one party to be gained by another. While this may seem obvious, what I am interested in is the unsustainable nature of this process. From one standpoint, gift giving is one-sided and completely illogical. It serves no benefit to give away time and possession for nothing in exchange. Yet something about human nature makes gift giving a reciprocal process, albeit an uncertain one. It harkens back to the way that art is valued- an argument of intrinsic and instrumental values. Though pure gift giving means to relinquish without expectations of return, gifts are often reciprocated by more gifts.

On a small scale gesture and gift giving was at the core of the project in Greece. I was constantly receiving and distributing stones to build the project. There was no monetary gain for anyone involved. This constant physical interaction was the basis for the completed piece. It was shared labor, transferred from one person to another. Additionally during the project, my friends and I were brought breakfast and drinks while we worked. I was given a book about pebble work. These were gifts from total strangers that I could only say thank you for in return. The piece itself was a culmination of the things I had experienced and done in appreciation for the time and space I borrowed from them.

### *Labor*

Though not strenuous, the piece was a time-intensive, laborious process. It was physical labor that created a finished piece through a collection of smaller gestures. This became a point of interest for me especially because the piece was not permanent. The finished product was not meant to stay for any period of time, in fact during the process, the stones were thrown in disarray and had to be repaired. Objectively speaking, the piece was pointless; it served no practical purpose and took up space on the beach. However it was enjoyed not only by my peers but by the locals as well. In response, I question why people engage in "pointless work." When does labor become valuable, and when does that value validate the work?

This lapse in practicality evokes argument of intrinsic and instrumental values, doing work for works sake. In the topic of the arts, sometimes labor intensive practices can seem pointless. An artist could work on a single piece for their entire life and never be recognized for their work. A single individual will never be able to compete with a

standard industrialized system of production in both production and monetary value, yet often the work of the individual is given value over industrialized standards. Labor is something romanticized. Everyone engages in labor to some extent, but they do not give agency to their work. Someone in the food service is accustomed to repetitive actions, producing hundreds of iterations of the same thing, yet they are never recognized for the whole of their work. I had spoken about how I did not garner any interest until some amount of work in my Greece project was established. Materialism plays a huge part in how my piece was received. Another factor was the scale of the work. I could have conducted the same if not more labor on the piece at a much smaller scale, but I doubt it would have garnered as much interest. The problem with most labor is that the physical product rarely shows the culmination of work leading up to the single iteration. It is both the participation in labor and the huge variance in how we value it that is the point of my discussion.

## **Drawing Inspiration**

Having broken down some of the concepts that were in play with my project in Greece, the end goal was to try to replicate the project to further breakdown the experience. It obviously would not be possible to copy the project or even translate it to another context; having already finished the project, I doubt even returning to Spetses would allow me to replicate it. Thus research into existing artists and cultures would be necessary in order to construct a new project that could have the same organic growth and experience as the piece in Spetses. I was looking for artists that engaged in the same concepts of gesture, gift and labor to see how others may have had similar experience to mine and hopefully provide inspiration for future projects.

### **Mierle Laderman Ukeles**

In 1968 Mierle Ukeles became a mother, which led her to become one of New York City's most renowned artists. Originally an avant-garde artist, Ukeles entered a crisis when she gave birth. She had worked years to become an artist and suddenly the label of "mother" overshadowed all other descriptions of herself. From this conflict Ukeles would proceed to produce work considered to be a touchstone of conceptual and feminist art. In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969* she asserted that everyday banalities could be considered art. She set out to make an awareness of the household chores hidden away in domestic settings and bring them to the forefront through art. Not only that, but she experimented with the concept that anything and everything that she conducted would be art.

Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art. “We have no Art, we try to do everything well.”<sup>3</sup>

This focus on manual labor and maintenance work would lead to the project *Touch Sanitation*, the piece of my interest.



Figure 4.1: *Touch Sanitation* 1979-1980

“I’m not here to watch you, to study you, to analyze you, to judge you. I’m here to be with you: all the shifts, all the seasons, to walk out the whole City with you.”

I face each worker, shake hands, and say: “Thank you for keeping NYC alive.” /

Performance Duration: 11 months, at least 1 to 2 8-hour/per day work shifts. With

8,500 sanitation workers. / Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.<sup>4</sup>

Over the course of a year, Ukeles would document herself thanking around 8,500 sanitation workers, thanking each one of them personally for their work in the city.

Given her own frustration with household chores, this piece sought to bring

<sup>3</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969!*. Arnolfini,

<sup>4</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*. 1977-80. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

acknowledgement to the hours of work unseen and underappreciated that sanitation workers provide our cities. *Touch Sanitation* is a piece about systems of infrastructure. It gives notice to the underlying clockwork that keeps things working, while giving a face to the individuals in the job. It is a time-intensive piece based on the labor of sanitation workers and her own dedication to thanking them. The final showcase is a collection of numerous instances that all coalesce to create something overwhelming. The impact of her work is heightened not only because of her interaction with subjects undesirable, but because of the scale and intimacy of her work.

This was one of the pieces that immediately stood out as relevant to my research. Ukeles gave herself simple parameters, but performed it in such a way that a single act repeated to an absurd amount could create the variety and cohesiveness that the final showcase had. The gesture of thanking an individual with a thankless job held both physical interaction and emotional sentiment. It was a powerful piece that stood out in its time, not only for the social reasons, but also in the way that it treated the finished art piece. At the time art still was primarily focused on the representation of the final piece, not the maintenance and process leading up to it. This project thrust the maintenance and process forward as the art itself.

That being said, there are issues that I have with this piece. I think often when external parties try to assist other groups, they cannot truly step into the experience of said group. The gesture of thanking each of the sanitation workers is beautiful, but having seen the documentation of the process, the image does little to show how this was done. Ukeles' shaking of hands was something of a spectacle, taken at the scene of work with camera crew surrounding. Often the documentation of Ukeles' art seemed to



interrupt the work of the sanitation workers. However, my main point of contention is Ukeles' role in the context she worked in. While Ukeles did commit to this project for almost a year, she never had to actually engage with the work of urban maintenance. Her piece and its work hours were a parody of the actual work schedules of those working. As an art piece, critiquing and bringing awareness of different groups may be enough, but when the piece steps into the realm of art-activism, the art piece is often scrutinized for its benefit to the group of interest. Boris Groys addresses this in an essay, *On Art Activism*.

“Art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art—not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself.”

Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place—but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists.<sup>5</sup>

My frustration with *Touch Sanitation* is because I think it has great potential to benefit all parties involved, but in the end I cannot help but think that Ukeles is the main beneficiary. The success of her piece has created carbon copies of the experience, burying the actual sanitation workers under the spectacle and commodity of art.

Another issue with *Touch Sanitation* I have is with its treatment of individuals involved. Ukeles thanked 8,500 people for their work, but each individual is lost in the accumulation of all the experiences. Intimacy is lost in the mass. This is not a direct critique but rather an issue that I feel is not properly addressed. When things are generalized, detail is lost. In my Greek project, while there were many that participated, I felt the experience was mutually beneficial to all involved. However this is something

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<sup>5</sup> Boris Groys "On Art Activism," *E-Flux:Journal* #56 (2014) Accessed

that developed organically, because participation in the piece was instigated by the participants. In reality, to intentionally create a collaborative piece at the scale of *Touch Sanitation* an element of control had to be implemented. The spontaneity of my project in Greece seemed to be impossible to replicate intentionally.

### **Paiute Basket Weaving**

Creating a piece that involved human participation was something that I had thought was integral to the experience. In this regard, I wanted to immerse myself into a different context in order to absorb information to return in some physical form. Much of the success of the Greek piece was due to my total immersion into Greek culture. Though my time was short, I dove intensely into the culture and let those influences shape my work. With this in mind, when I was given the opportunity to work with the Northern Paiute tribe of Warm Springs, I thought it was a good opportunity to recreate the conditions of my experience in Spetses with another culture. However, there were certain aspects of my work with the Paiute that would make me decide not to pursue this path.

In a lot of ways, I found that the Paiute lifestyle fit well into the conceptual art making process and I was excited by the prospect. The class I was in was about reclaiming Paiute history and recording it for future generations. The Paiute have historically been the marginalized of the marginalized, and currently reside in the Warm Springs Reservation on a miniscule fraction of their original land. Their culture is continued by the teachings of tribal elders and the knowledge they have known passed from generation to generation. The medium that I was interested in was the practice of Paiute basket weaving. It exemplified everything that excited me about my project in

Greece. It was technique without documentation, only taught in intimate situations. The materials were processed and harvested from the land they lived on and was their way of remembering and practicing their culture. The baskets themselves became extensions of their makers and were almost always given as gifts. When you gave away a basket, you were giving a part of yourself in a completely one-sided gesture, no reciprocation required. The baskets were always made for practical purposes and hardly ever sold for monetary gain. It was a beautiful, unsustainable process. Theirs was a culture based completely on oral histories and participation. This meant that at the whim of individual, decades of history and culture could be lost. But for those that did participate in the community, culture became everything for the,.

Honestly I was scared of the responsibility my participation in this culture would mean. It had become very apparent that a few months working with the Paiute would not merit creating a project with them. I was in danger of doing what I had thought Ukeles had done to the sanitation workers. I did not want the Paiute to become an instrument for a project where I would be the main beneficiary. Even writing about my experience with them is difficult. In the same way I feel that an image does not accurately describe an experience, there is no amount writing that could explain the process of Paiute basket weaving and what it meant to their culture. There was also the issue of distance. I was geographically located too far from my sources and research partners in the tribe in order to regularly meet which did not allow me to fully immerse myself in their community.

Nevertheless, my research with the Paiute was an important step in figuring out what elements were needed in order to make my piece successful. I decided that

although immersion was an important aspect in the work, it had to be done in a personal context. Placing myself in someone else's context would be a disservice to both parties. There was also the incredible kindness in Paiute mannerism. In an argument of instrumental and intrinsic value, they place themselves on intrinsic side completely. The history of Native American oppression in the United States has forced the Paiute into a culture that has completely different priorities in what they value. Any materialism they harbored was purely for practical and sentimental purposes. Excess was outshined for a longing for community and human interaction. These gestures would shift my focus from what kind materials I would work with, to rather, how those materials were handled and interacted with. While my project would not continue with the Paiute, I would adopt the focus on gestures from them.

### **Sharon Hayes**

Chronologically, my research on Sharon Hayes began before my involvement with the Paiute, but my interest in her work represented a divergence from collaborative to more personal investigations. While she steps away from the gestures that I am interested in, her role in her work through performance and reenactment would play a crucial role in how I considered my work.

Sharon engages in video, performance, and installations in an investigation of intersections between politics and speech. In her piece, *My Fellow Americans 1981-88*, Sharon recited all 36 of Ronald Reagan's official "Address to the Nation" speeches in a single ten hour performance.



Figure 4.2: *My Fellow Americans 1981-88*<sup>6</sup> 2004

My interest in Sharon is in the way that she presents her work and what that work is. In this instance, her reenactment is one of endurance and touches on the role of body in performance. It was a concept I had not considered at full depth, but my project in Greece was a reenactment of the pebblework done in Spetses. While labor was the primary focus of my project, the role of my body was not taken into account. To better understand the aspect of performance, I reenacted Sharon's piece in my own, titled *Sincerely, President Schill June 2015-17*. In this piece, I recited every address to campus my university president published from June 2015 to June 2017 in a seven hour performance.

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<sup>6</sup> Sharon Hayes, *My Fellow Americans 1981-88*. 2004. Republican Like Me, Parlour Projects, Williamsburg, NY



Figure 4.3: *Sincerely, President Schill* June 2015-17

In this piece, I was able to utilize and synthesize some of my developing research. Although I was performing a reenactment, it was one specific to my context. While Sharon's piece was one that encapsulated my context, by personalizing and focusing the context of the piece, I was provided with the material and purpose for the piece. The second aspect of this piece and the most important was the element of performance. By orating Schill's addresses, I was able to claim ownership of the words. I felt the physical toll of two years worth of speeches condensed into seven hours. In terms of material, the body had become one of the most convenient and effective tools. Through performance and reenactment, I could show the work behind the art and put it forward.

### **Tehching Hsieh**

Continuing to search for a more personalized piece about labor, I was referred to Tehching Hsieh by my advisor. A Taiwanese-American artist, Tehching engaged in incredible endurance performances pertaining to the passage of time. He would create

parameters for a project spanning over an entire year and then perform them. In total he performed five, one year performances from 1978 to 1986 and one thirteen year piece from 1986 to 1999. Each is a philosophical investigation of the passage of time and life in that process. The piece of my interest is his second year-long performance: *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*.

In this piece, Tehching set out to clock in to a punch-in clock that he installed in a gallery and on every hour of every day of the year, he would clock in. After each punch, he would take a photo and leave immediately. He had an assistant that would verify each days punches and serve to hold Tehching accountable throughout the process. In the end, he had clocked in around 8,760 times with 133 failures. For the display of the final piece, the photos documenting each punch are displayed along with a video comprised of the photos. What struck me about this piece was its simplicity. Rules were set and adhered to the best of his ability. Any abnormalities were the failures that he accrued. Because he clocked in on every hour, he rarely slept more than fifty minutes at a time. The failures were due to missing the hour either by sleeping too late, clocking in too early or technical failure. The whole performance itself is a testament to great endurance and dedication. Speaking about the piece, Tehching says this:

"Life is a life sentence. Life is passing time, life is free thinking. So that is basically my work, from this philosophy; you consume time until you die."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Tehching Hsieh: One Year Performance 1980-1981," YouTube video, 9:05, posted by "DasPlatforms," April 30th, 2014



Figure 4.4: *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*<sup>8</sup>

Tehching's philosophy about simply passing time is exacerbated to an almost obsessive scale, yet the piece is incredibly attractive to me. Life is filled with rituals and repetition that we seldom give agency to. Tehching's performance is a testament to

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Shen. *Waiting to Punch the Time Clock*. 1981. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York



everyday banalities distilled into an act that is tied to labor in industrialized workspace, yet his failures show a lapse in consistency. His failures as the only inconsistencies are the elements of randomness and the human portion of the piece. His piece isn't about production, simply the passing of time and how we go about doing it.

What attracted me to Tehching's piece was the minimalism of it all. While fundamentally different from my piece in Greece, it still touched on ideas of gesture, labor and accumulating small experiences. When I was researching Ukeles and the Paiute, details of any possible project were hard to establish because of the many variables involved. Tehching created an incredibly simple act and let the volume speak for itself. The mass of images produced in the end serve as an indication of the time he spent and he used relatable measurements and experiences in order to make his piece empathetic. Tehching's work would serve as the final point of reference before my decided piece.

## **Work in Progress: the Performance**

From Greece in the Summer of 2016 to Spring 2018, my ideas for what my thesis piece would be were distilled into a performance of production. My experience in Greece was predicated on the context and concepts of gesture and labor. I had originally wanted to do something similar to the project and work with the earth, but upon further investigation, I realized that the material was secondary to the way the material was handled. At its core my performance would still be predicated on concepts of gesture and labor, but they would be greatly changed by its context.

### **Paper Context**

At the time I was working at a copy shop. Every day we processed a number of odd jobs from the university to print course materials, exams and any other student work that came in. It was a line of production that was made to be efficient, and on a regular day we could process thousands of prints. It was the repetitive process of taking and executing jobs that would cause me to relate my work with my art practice. Ukeles utilized the confines of her position to influence her work and I did the same. My position as an employee and as a student in university brought to the table rituals of assignments and production of content, but more importantly a relationship with paper. As a student of almost 18 years, paper has been an integral part of how I consume and distribute information. The amount of loose leaf papers I have accumulated over the years could fill a few books to say the least. And being in a copy shop only increased my exposure to paper dramatically. Not only was I constantly around it, but now I knew what it was made of and the details and qualities of paper. Paper also played a part in

my formative years. My father would teach me origami when I was a child and told stories along with it. As told by my father, there is a Japanese tradition that involves making origami cranes. When someone close is sick, one-thousand cranes are made for them. Ten strings of one-hundred cranes are strung up and placed by their bedside. The thought was that if the person died, the cranes would fly them to heaven. As morbid as that conclusion is, the point was that friends and family engaged in a gesture of love and care through a production of multiples. This was the grounding element for my performance piece that tied in my context and concepts. However, instead of producing cranes, I opted for another design my father taught me: paper balloons.

It was a simple method to create volume from a flat piece of paper. The act of breathing into the balloons was also necessary to give them shape. I felt that symbolically this worked for my piece as well. In everything we create, we insert a part of ourselves. In order to create the paper balloons I have to breathe into them- breathing life into the balloons. However the balloons don't hold any air inside of them, it is the memory that paper has that allows the balloons to keep shape. In a piece that stressed the process over the finished product, the fact that energy and life is only present in the balloons until the very moment they are finished worked in an anti-materialistic way. That being said, even though I wanted my piece to be anti-materialistic, I wanted to comment on the idea of materialism. This is why there was a physical byproduct as opposed to a simple gesture. In the process of making a paper balloon, a normal letter-sized paper would have to cut to a square, leaving a strip in excess. I used this strip in order to create a "receipt" for each balloon being made, implying some order, or intent

in production. This covered the material and how the material would be processed. All that was left was to create the parameters and rules of engagement.



Figure 5.1: Paper Balloons from *Work in Progress* 2018

## Format

I decided that my piece would be a performance sometime after discovering Sharon and Tehching. In order to create a piece with the process being the main focus, I felt the art needed to be in process at the time it was received. Because an image cannot explain an experience and words can only consolidate a part of what a concept was, I felt that at least some portion of the art's public life had to be an active one of making. Having myself be actually in the space that finished work is displayed was a big part of the piece too. I wanted to show art in progress to people used to digesting finished representations. There is an idea that art is only alive, it only has energy when it is being

developed and made. Once it is finished, it loses that energy and is sent to the gallery to rest in peace. Being a student and an artist, sometimes it feels that work is never finished. Finished projects are only step-stones in a much longer on-going endeavor. This was a sentiment that I wanted to give the illusion of during the performance.

### **Tools and Dress**



Figure 5.2: The set up

For the physical set up, I opted for a minimal approach. Since the process had to be at the forefront, everything else needed to be secondary; there had to be less to distract, and I had to dress in a way not to draw attention to myself. The actual work station was only composed of four parts, the table, chair, paper and stamp. Each of these

components was meant to be familiar in a work setting, yet convenient and portable, implying that the piece could be set up anywhere. The table was positioned in the middle of the gallery so that I was the first thing that anyone would see. It utilized the setup common in reception areas, where I was the first stop to the gallery space. As for my own physical appearance, I opted for a very basic look, I did not want the focus to be on the artist during the performance, but the production of the paper balloons. To this end, I cut my hair short and wore only black. Borrowing from Tehching's wardrobe, this dress in combination with the setup in gallery created a dystopian work station where I would work for all open hours of the gallery.

## The Performance



Figure 5.3: Day 4<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Driver

From April 9th to April 13th I would work in the Laverne Krause Gallery for every hour it was open. For each day a single ream of paper was set apart. Each days amount of work would be defined by the time available, or the paper remaining. At all hours of operation, no one would see me out of the chair, and no one would see me stop working. After the production of a single object, both the balloon and the "receipt" were stamped with an alphanumeric code, designating the day and the number of production. The objects are swept aside after completion, in order to make room for the next iteration. I would not invite conversation, but when prompted I would answer only to satisfy the question. During the piece I would not eat, drink or use the restroom.

These were the parameters I had set for myself for this performance. I wanted to create at least the illusion that work was constantly happening. Like my project in Greece I expected to garner little interest until a good amount of work had been completed. I was met at first with questioned looks or remarks, most people aside from those I knew ignored me in the gallery. I was rarely spoken to at all on the first day. The second day was cut short because my peers were defending their thesis in the gallery, but at this point I had already set a precedent. At the end of day one, the paper balloons were starting to form a considerable pile, and more people started to notice. On the second day, people walking by the previous day started to realize that I had been there the entire time, and I began to attract people that would check in every once in while to see my progress. It became apparent that people could glean concepts of production and labor, however most of my conversations were explaining why I was engaging in this production at all.



The point of my piece was to highlight the labor and production that we engage with on an everyday basis. Imagine that every time I washed my teeth, I used a new toothbrush. What would that kind of accumulation physically look like? My piece touched on the concept of waste, wasted time and material. But to that end I argue, that this kind of "waste" happens on a daily basis, but is given less urgency because of how far the iterations are spread apart time-wise. If I were to consume the same amount of food I would in a week in a single day, it would be a staggering amount. If I were to spend a month's salary on a single day, the price would be exorbitant. The idea that I wanted to focus on was the accumulation of work. It spoke of last-minute rush jobs, procrastination and time management. I wanted to showcase what a weeks amount of work could look like regardless of what the action actually was. It was not my intention to criticize materialism, but rather draw attention to it. Over the course of the five days, the number of paper balloons would grow to an enormous amount and literally get in the way of future work. I feel that as a student, sometimes previous work can get in the way of learning, and I wanted to physically hint at what kind of byproduct a repeated act could accrue over time. The hours that I worked were also of significance, apart from outlying days where time was limited, I worked a nine to six hour job everyday. By appropriating common practices in everyday occupations, such as the work hours and the process of making receipts, I hoped to make the piece empathetic to work in our society. Over the course of the week, I had created 1,215 paper balloons and worked about 38 hours.

## Aftermath

During and after the performance I was able to discuss the piece with professors and contemporaries and was happy to see that many of the points that I wanted to convey were being understood. To me the best part of this experience was my interaction with people. While the production of the balloons became second nature and somewhat meditative, the physical and mental toll it took on me was beginning to show at the end of the week. If there were ever future iterations of this project, ergonomics would definitely come into play for the efficiency of production. However people were the only elements outside of my control and my interaction with them is what I consider to be an integral part of the piece. My main issue with *Touch Sanitation* and my attraction to *Time Clock Piece* was the role of the artist in each of those. While Ukeles was actively engaging with workers, she herself was distanced from the work. And while Tehching opted for a practice of isolationism and almost manic obsession, his dedication and role in the work made it all the more impactful. I definitely romanticize the labor Tehching engages in, it is something that I appreciate but could never fully understand or engage with. I opted for more of a middle route.

Because of how standard my appearance was, it was not clear to most whether or not I was an actor or the artist. This kind of anonymity prompted engagement from bystanders. While the focus of the work was the process of production, another important element was the way that people engaged with it. Work means nothing without the context around it. There were times during the performance that I grew exhausted of producing and lost the drive to continue. These were instances when I was not talking to anyone. A feeling of doubt came over me and I began to question whether

or not my endeavors were worth anything. A performance requires viewers, but it also continues without them. Similar to Tehching, Sharon's recital of Presidential addresses showcases aspects of endurance and isolationism, but in a different medium. While Tehching's performance required his physical presence, Sharon made a recording that was distributed. The difference between the two is that for Sharon, the piece was the performance, and for Tehching, the piece was the work. The difference is subtle, but in relation to my piece, I think both were crucial. Performance was the means that I was able to convey the work, it provided a visceral experience for me and those that viewed it. I wish I could say that the piece stood singularly about work, but my value in human interaction created a dependency on my viewers. An important element of production is the sense of satisfaction it produces. When each object was produced, the feeling of completing something gave drive to the next, but in a repetitive process with no practical purpose, an external element is often necessary to validate the process. My interactions with people and the ability to discuss my work gave me energy to continue. I feel that at the crux of matter, human interaction is what works like *Touch Sanitation*, *Time Clock Piece* and mine are built on.

## Conclusions

Though at this point I still cannot distill what exactly made my project in Greece so impactful, it was the starting point for developing my practice in conceptual art making. The concepts of gesture and labor all are seated within interaction with other people. As illogical and unsustainable gesture and gift giving is, it is human nature that places value in these interactions. As an artist, these interactions are what drive my interest in the dynamic between art and viewer. All art is participatory to a certain extent and I want to focus on addressing that participation and make it a part of the work. I make no claim to grand statements of world betterment, or suggest solutions to problems, but I want to reach people through the common ground we have in repetitive labor.

Looking at my project in Greece with the perspective I have now, I feel that at its core it was about the accumulation of interactions. As obvious as that may seem, the reason it was successful was because it was an amalgamation of parts that addressed the parts. People willingly and by their own initiative engaged with the piece; and it is this in combination with the satisfaction that production creates that simply made the piece a wholesome experience. Perhaps the concept of ephemera is something that I did not give enough agency to in this process. An experience can never be replicated again, even if produced the same way by the same people. Tehching's work was all about how in life, we accrue similar, but different experiences. These experiences can never be explained through imagery and words and exist only in the moment by those experiencing.

The conclusion of this discussion is about the residual matter. The energy in the process is what attracts us to create, to do, but after all the processing is done, we are left with a byproduct.



Figure 6.1: 1,215 paper balloons

Whether physical or emotional, something is left behind at the end of the process. The use and practicality of this residual matter is irrelevant, because people will value these things due to the experience of making or obtaining said object. But eventually, the accumulation will get in the way of having new experiences. My performance is

incomplete and aptly named *Work in Progress*. At the end of project I am left with four garbage bags full of 1,215 paper balloons. They are, in a way, husks of the energy that they held. Each one of them was a catalyst for production that spurred on the creation of another, but after they are created, they are spent and only take up space. Each one of them has some sentimental value- I can relate conversations I had with people to the serial number each balloon has- but to continue carrying the burden of all those experiences would be impossible. It seems rather anticlimactic to say that one should cherish and learn from their experiences, but I suppose that is the conclusion that I have reached at this point in time.

My experience in Greece was paramount in developing the way that I view and engage with art. And while there is merit to trying to disseminate why that is, time will pass and my perspective of the experience will constantly change and lead me to different conclusions. Regardless of whether I understand its impact on my life, I can be content that there was an impact and use that knowledge to proceed to the next iteration of production. From the piece in Spetses to *Work in Progress* the form had changed completely, but the nature had stayed the same. There is worth in engaging with production and satisfaction in the process. Art exists as a means to highlight idiosyncrasies of human interaction and push the next evolution of being. Just as the history of art has been built on the buildup of contrarian ideologies, the human experience is one that is built up of small experiences, each pushing towards the next one. There is bitter sweetness in knowing that my experience in Greece can never be replicated, but I am excited for what it will push me to do in the future.



Figure 6.2: *Fading back into Antiquity*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Petros Haritatos

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