

Joanna Spitzner
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Everson Museum

In my first “real” job just out of college, I was sort of required to eat lunch with my boss everyday—it was a two person office, just her and me. One day, I commented, rather pretentiously, that whenever the Dow Jones Industrial Average goes down, there are more homeless people. (I didn’t know then nor do I know now what the Dow Jones Industrial Average really means). She looked at me sort of shocked, and said there was no correlation between the two. She was always a pull yourself up by the bootstraps kind of person, yet also considered herself liberal.

Needless to say, I didn’t last long in that job.

The economy is still mysterious to me. I cannot claim to understand it, and even though I am increasingly reading more and more books about business practices, it stills seems like some far off game in which opaque decisions are made by some wizards behind a curtain, and which impact many. Karl Marx made more sense to me, as did Upton Sinclair, Theodore Drieser, Studs Terkel, and Barbara Ehrenriech.

In my life as an artist, I have found twin interests in the everyday and in systems. I must also admit that I have a lack of interest in objects, and prefer to forgo a thing to provoke an experience in favor of just having an experience.

In art school, as an undergraduate, I spent any free hour in the library looking up and reading about performance artists and conceptual art. And I come across this guy, Allan Kaprow, who says that the line between art and life should be eradicated. Brushing your teeth can be art. Becoming a mayor of a town is art; that is the real experiment.

In 2004, the average US worker spent 1,777 hours at work a year. (8760 hours in a year) Work is just one aspect of the economy, but I would say a central one. We tend to identify ourselves by what we do, which usually means what we do to make money. We go to school in order to get a job, we go to bed at a certain time and get up at a certain time, we dress a certain way, all for work. Most important, we act a certain way, for work is nothing if not a performance.

So, how do you make art of working life?

The project that I am going to talk to you about today is the Joanna Spitzner Foundation. There a two different explorations of the economy in this project. One is an exploration of working life, the other is the exploration of philanthropy. Simply stated, the Joanna Spitzner foundation gives grants to artists funded solely through wage jobs that I work. Our first grant will be for \$2,364.99, which came from 399.75 hours as a part time cashier at Price Chopper.

I hope that in some ways the bringing together of these two spheres: wage jobs and philanthropy, will somehow engage in issues of class. Artists, and art, have always had a shifting relationship with class. Degas and Lautrec could hang out with prostitutes, and even paint them, yet their work eventually found itself in the homes of the world's wealthiest people. Artists move in to cheap neighborhoods and make them safe for the cosmopolitan upper class.

My foundation hopes to show how money is created and contrast ideas of wealth with that of working class, who often cannot afford to give away money. Although I am really talking about income, not wealth: most foundations derive their funds from investments and interest on endowments. I want to retain a more direct relationship to money. As I said, I don't really understand the stock market.

I would argue that all profit comes from labor (like I said, I like Marx). Value is added to raw materials through the activity of labor. Surplus value, and the profit derived from it, comes from the difference in the value labor has added and what labor has been paid.

Who are America's largest philanthropists? The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has 29 billion dollars in assets. The Ford Foundation (11 billion) The J Paul Getty Trust (10 billion), The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (7 billion).

Number 15 is the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with 2 billion dollars in assets.

Now, I don't dispute that these foundations do great good in the world. But to me, it brings up questions of how all the wealth was accumulated in the first place.

Andrew Carnegie played a pivotal role the idea of a private foundation. In 1889, he published an essay called "The Gospel of Wealth" in which he advocated for giving away money for the public good, for "The man who dies rich dies disgraced." By the time he died, in 1919, he had given away \$325,000,000.

He argued against leaving money to descendants, or bequeathing it to public purposes. He also argued against distributing it in small sums among people, for it "would have been wasted in the indulgence of the appetite, some of it in excess, and it may be doubted whether even the part put to best use, that of adding comforts of the home, would have yielded results for the race."

Carnegie believed in competition, and that the best rose to the top, and therefore those at the top would do the best job of overseeing the proper use of wealth for the greatest public good.

Carnegie began his journey towards wealth when his parents mortgaged their home so he could invest \$500 in stock in the Adams Express Company. He then got a bank loan to invest in the Woodruff Sleeping Car Company. He worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad, but eventually left it to start the Keystone Bridge Works, and then got into steel.

Workers in Carnegie's steel plants worked 12 hour days. They were given one holiday, the Fourth of July. In 1890, the average worker received \$10 a week, \$20 more a year than the poverty line at the time, which was \$500 a year. One of the bloodiest strikes of the 19th Century was the Homestead strike of 1892 at Carnegie Steel Company. The union was virtually destroyed, and at the end of the strike, Carnegie Steel quickly instituted longer working hours and a pay cut. Carnegie was proud that the cost of steel was cheap because of his methods: "three pounds of finished steel are now bought in Pittsburgh for two cents, which is cheaper than anywhere else on earth..." Sounds a little to me like Wal Mart...

In January 2005, I applied at several places for a job. I wanted to work in retail, fast food being my second choice, because these are entry level jobs and it seemed like the right place to enter into my project of thinking about work. On February 19, I started work at Price Chopper, as a part time cashier, for \$6.00 an hour, New York State minimum wage. After three months, I was given a raise, to \$6.20 an hour. My last day of work was on July 30.

Although I documented every shift I worked at Price Chopper, I feel I am only slightly closer at getting to the essence of work, the experience of work. This is not to say that I didn't learn a lot, which I did, but it does not fit easily in a narrative. Work is boring, and although I find boredom to be as important experience as well, it does not grab you, it is difficult to aestheticize, which is probably why I like it.

There is the repetition and regulation in working. Of not really being yourself, but of performing tasks for others. There is the mind wandering, and thinking about being elsewhere, of being yourself again. The uniform helps with this performance, I am someone else now. Punching in, getting written up, signing in at the beginning of your shift, logging into the register, being given a number for the computer, knowing there are cameras all around you—all to ensure your honesty and efficiency.

Conversely, the pleasure of doing a task well – knowing produce codes so you don't have to look them up, refilling bags or cleaning the console. Or of just concentrating on tasks because the time goes faster. Of ironing my uniform. Or of just seeing people in the most mundane moments. The small conversations you have with strangers. And perhaps those around you have slightly different lives than you do, but this seems just a fluke, anyway.

Then there is the distance—I am doing this for the fun of it. I do not have to be disappointed at the small numbers on my paycheck. I can stay pleasant because I have other things, and entire other life, which can keep me in balance. And that life is in balance too, because I'm not in the ivory tower all the time. But I am also lying to people. I can't get too close to those I work with. They can already tell I'm different – I am 35 and don't have any kids, I look a little clean cut, and healthy, I surely don't know what an EBT card is or have ever had to use one.

A few documents:

3/18/05

7:30 AM - 4:00 PM express cashier

I came in early to "level shelves," which means make the front of the shelves look nice-- just pulling forward the first row of things and straightening up. I started in the soup aisle, and at the end of an hour or so, I was only two-thirds of the way through one side of the aisle. I now know where to locate any kind of soup in the store, plus varieties of mac and cheese and baked beans. Some cans of beans were really bugging me-- I would stack them and they would continue to fall over. These were the smaller cans of Bush's baked beans, and they were in an older style can. I thought of old pictures of grocery stores with pyramids of cans and how easily they must have tumbled. I asked AF how often they do this, and he said every day. They usually do it on the night shift, but they are having trouble finding people to work the night shift. AF is switching from the front end to stocking.

PP rescued me at 9:00 (when my scheduled shift started). I was called over the PA system to the front end. In the aisles, I could hear the muzak much better--heard Solisbury Hill again. I could also hear the EZ scans (self-service scanners), and realized the voice on the EZ scans is the same as the voice that makes store announcements between muzak--such as Price Chopper now features some cheese that won an award and the World Cheese Festival. I wondered who is the woman who is the voice of Price Chopper

4/07/05

9:15 AM - 4:30 PM Express Cashier

A woman had put together a box of donuts and muffins, but then changed her mind and said she didn't want them. She said she had come too far to go back--that she would just eat them all. She said she's been eating lots of fruit and vegetables and drinking water, and that she used to be 280 pounds.

Two other women in my line were having a discussion about the difference between vegan and vegetarian. The one's daughter had just become vegan, while her boyfriend was a vegetarian. She then described cooking Thanksgiving dinner with them. The other woman said it sounded like too much work to be a vegan.

I spoke with an elderly woman about spring. She said her daffodils were just starting to peek through, and that she thought she liked this even more than when everything is in full bloom.

Another woman handed me her Price Chopper card--it was one of the older ones and fairly beat up. She said she didn't want to get a new one because this was a lucky card. When this store first opened they had a contest for new customers--they chose a house at

random and for every item in the house purchased at Price Chopper, the family would get a certain amount of money. She won over \$3,000.

4/28/05

6:00 PM -12:00 AM EZ Scan

For the most part, running the EZ Scan is just watching people. Often, a credit card receipt spits out from my register printer, with the person's name on it (and for them to come over and sign.) It sort of felt like the "Minority Report," or something to see the names appear like that. The other main job is to hit the okay button a lot, as people don't put their "item in the bag," and then the scanner stops and says "Please wait for cashier assistance," until I press the button on my screen. One guy commented to me that that voice must drive me crazy. Only a few times there were people at every scanner needing help, like a check or produce code, at the same time. Otherwise, it was pretty boring. I started watching how people scanned, and how awkward they seemed compared to the cashiers.

5/15/05

1:00 PM - 8:45 PM Courtesy Clerk

At a little after 7, HH told me to go to security--"just knock on the door and they'll let you in." I sat down in a chair while one security guy, sitting, and the other one, standing at the door, spoke to a woman who was also sitting. She was caught shoplifting band-aids (value: \$1.99.) She had bought some things, including bandaids, but didn't have enough to get another package. The one security guy, at a computer, was filling in a form--her name and address. After a few moments, they told me I was a witness. After the form was filled out, he printed it out and went through it with her. She wasn't going to be arrested, because "she was cooperative and the item was so small," but they were going to fine her \$75. There is a law in which stores can sue people for 5 times the worth of a item, maximum \$500, or minimum \$75. If she doesn't pay it in fifteen days, they will take her to court for \$500. She can call a number to set up a payment plan. I felt bad for her. I thought the guys were more or less nice to her, but they also kept on commenting on stealing bandaids, and that she stole the cheap brand, wasn't very good at it, etc. Their last comment to her was that they didn't expect to see her in the store anymore. I then signed two forms, as a witness. They said this was just so I could testify that they didn't beat her up or anything. I said all they did was make bad jokes, and the manager (who had come in at some point during all of this) said that they really shouldn't have done that. I then asked the security guy how often he caught people. He said this was the second person they caught today, which was usual. His record was 10 in one day, and usually they catch an employee every week or two as well.

7/17/05

4:15 PM -10:00 PM Express Register

After my break, I was on the express register for the rest of the night, and mine was the only express open, so I had a steady line. A woman came through who said she didn't know many of the people here. She said she had worked here, and had worked for Price Chopper for 18 years, and had retired in August. I told her I had been here about five months, and that there were always new people. Later, a man came through who told me he worked at P&C, and talked about what a pain it was--people didn't have their card and wanted one, etc., and that you always had to be nice to them anyway.

I had a lot of customers with WIC checks. When I was bagging, a man came through with his son and two carts full of groceries, half of one just WIC stuff. He said he had a lot of kids.

A woman came through with a bunch of junk food--potato chips, cookies, popsicles, candy, which totaled a little over \$26.00. She said it was for all the kids hanging out at her house, now that school was out, and also complained how expensive it was. I asked her how many kids she was watching, and she said 2 of her own, and 2-3 others.

As the night wore on, one customer said to me that all the weirdos were out at Price Chopper tonight. I said that every night was like this. He replied that maybe all the weird ones go through my line. Actually, I am not sure who he was referring to, because no one ahead of him seemed very odd to me.

For these and other exciting tales, you can have a copy of my book.

So now, I am beginning the second part of my work, that of administering the Foundation. It is my hope that the foundation will actually be a good grant to get, although always modest.

And then it will be time to find a new job.