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# On Assemblage and Erasure

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Dante Migone-Ojeda

On Assemblage and Erasure

5/6/16

A.B. in Physics, B.F.A. in Studio Art, concentration in printmaking

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## Abstract

Through textual and visual research, I assert that the root cause of the injustice that drives my work and the work of the artists within my thesis paper is erasure. I attribute this erasure in large part to the role of neoliberalism upon the world stage, and its pervasive global influence. While neoliberalism did not create inequality, it has codified it and through its relentless push for “progress” it has propped up a dynamic of oppressor and oppressed. This in turn leads to simple categorization and ultimately erasure. I posit that my work not only makes this erasure visible, but also combats that erasure through adherence to a social theory of assemblage, introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. By positioning my work in the context of a series of other artists and philosophers, I transform the oft referenced self-portrait from simple representation into a statement of purpose and a means of undermining a system of oppression.

The role of the self-portrait in art has been varied and storied throughout the history of making. In its most fundamental form, the self-portrait is a statement of existence, a statement of self-valuation and self-affirmation in the face of erasure. However, this role has been complicated by the influence of the global neoliberal economy and its role in creating the oppressor and the oppressed. The combination of these factors has compounded the erasure of a vast swath of artists. In order to combat the erasure of generalization under this utility driven social theory, I put forth the idea of a self-portrait through assemblage.

My thesis work focuses on the construction of boxes containing objects and remnants relevant to the construction of my own identity. This work is founded on the theory of assemblage, that is, that social identity is constructed as a combination of relations of exteriority. This theory and these relations are discussed in further detail later in this paper. In this paper, I will begin by introducing and defining some vital concepts, as well as provide some much needed historical background. This will segue into the discussion of assemblage theory as an alternative to the categorization of self provided by neoliberal thought, and finally into the poetics and artistic influences that are at work in the creation of this thesis. The fundamental argument of this work is that while neoliberalism and the dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed result in the erasure and homogenization of identity and therefore the self, and assemblage theory is a viable alternative to that construction of identity, resulting in a new understanding of self-portraiture.



*Self Portrait (Embracing the things I can't let go)*, Mixed Media, Dante Migone-Ojeda, 2016. Dimensions Variable.

It is necessary before continuing further to elucidate a few convenient definitions, beginning with a short history of neoliberalism within a modern context. Essentially, when I discuss neoliberalism with regards to the pseudo-colonial influence of U.S. foreign policy, I am focusing on the return to laissez-faire economics paired with a philosophy of inherent social utility through work. This mode of thought is indicative of the “organismic metaphor”. The metaphor is explained simply as “a superficial analogy between society and the human body,...that just as bodily organs work together for the organism as a whole, so the function of social institutions is to work in harmony for the benefit of society” (DeLanda, 2006; 8). Much of this was complemented heavily by the ideological push on the global stage for the consensus of what Chodor calls the *Pax Americana*. By incorporating a component of the seemingly Marxist welfare state with ‘embedded liberalism’, an economic model was born that essentially declawed the labor movement by facilitating a relationship

between the corporate structure and the workers existing within it; the first inklings of a society centered around comfort rather than self-determination (Chodor, 2014; 47). The spread of this ideology was aided by its attachment to the anti-communist movement, a natural and straightforward marriage. However, this marriage leads inevitably to a spread by force.

The wars waged in the ideological battle between the neoliberal standard and the spread of the communist paradigm were not fought in the industrialized nations, but rather in the developing world. The United States sought to expand the influence of the neoliberal system in the face of communism throughout Latin America. Achieved by a steady propaganda process as well as the spread of a paradigm ensuring their superiority, nationalistic economic and political tendencies were enacted making it easier to extort from these nations the raw resources required for continued growth. However, nationalism does not inherently complement capitalist and neoliberal ideology.

“The rise of potentially radical governments like...Goulart’s Brazil” threatened the order established by the *Pax Americana*, and ultimately “these governments failed, toppled by American-sponsored coups amid economic and political crises” (Chodor, 2014; 48). In general, the nationalistic impulse toward self-determination empowered indigenous communities and the lower social strata. These problems were often solved via military coup backed by the CIA and the upper class, and these situations, with few exceptions, resulted in genocide, forced disappearances, and imposition of a national identity of social unity, thereby erasing a mosaic of identities<sup>1</sup>. While some states were directly targeted (i.e. Pinochet’s Chile, the Dirty Wars in Argentina), through economic impositions of those neighboring nations whose legitimate governments had been replaced by American figureheads and strongmen, neoliberalism exerted its influence on the nations surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> At times entire peoples were literally erased, as in the case of the Mapache in Chile, the Montoneros resistance group in Argentina, and more recently entire Mayan villages in Guatemala.

them<sup>2</sup>. In the case of my family's nation, Peru, this manifested in a leftist military junta as a counterpoint to the economic policies surrounding the nation<sup>3</sup>. This is directly tied to my own identity, as this was the period during which my parents were coming of age in Peru.

All of this is to say, the history and current role of neoliberalism is one of erasure. The goals have largely been centered on homogenization and its relationship to efficiency and ultimately comfort. The effects of the current iteration of neoliberal policy in the United States have largely and disproportionately affected marginalized communities. One of the core tenets of neoliberalism is the comfort of the ruling class, and the marginal comfort of the remainder of society. This means that equality isn't necessary to a functioning neoliberal system; marginalized communities function in this system by experiencing a relatively comfortable existence. While these groups suffer injustices almost constantly<sup>4</sup>, these communities are comparatively complacent because they've been placated with just enough humanity and agency to keep them from overturning the extant system.

At this point it seems prudent to introduce another idea to be defined; that of the Oppressor/Oppressed dichotomy as outlined by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This definition is wrapped up in the notion of dehumanization. In the words of Freire, "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire, 1970; 44). Characterized in this fashion, neoliberalism takes on a decidedly sinister bent; by the nature of its erasure and its focus on utility, it is a system that inherently negates the humanity of members that exist within it. Again, Freire notes

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<sup>2</sup> It can be taken as it may that in spite of the despotic reign of the various dictators and juntas established in Latin America during this time, two of the states within Latin America that are often held as a shining example of industrialization, hard work, and the capitalist ideal are Chile and Argentina. In particular in Chile, Pinochet is still credited by many with drastic advancement.

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, many Peruvians idolize the Chileans and the Argentines for their industriousness, often ignoring the booms and troughs that those nations endure, while Peru has the unique distinction of posting steady economic growth for a period going on 30 years.

<sup>4</sup> These injustices are varied in their manifestation. They range from the pay gap to terrorism to murder in the streets to environmental injustice. The system is pervasive, from city planning to policing to wages to ownership.

“This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity,’ the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this ‘generosity,’ which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source” (Freire, 1970; 44).

By this standard, the problems with a neoliberal mindset are thrown into far sharper relief. By providing the minimal welfare state as well as a deceptive sense of utility and meaning the most marginalized members of society are unwilling or unable to muster the strength to return to either group their humanity. Is it then impossible to fight against that system? Is it then impossible to reclaim our humanity?

Interestingly, the dichotomy struggles to hold in a neoliberal context. By the nature of our globalized consumption it is exceedingly difficult not to consider each participant residing within the developed world as part of the oppressor class<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it is useful to introduce the idea of an intersectional identity in order to consider the possibility of simultaneously existing in multiple states

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<sup>5</sup> By its nature, the consumption laid out by the global capitalist system often results in inexpensive, exploitative labor, with the prime examples being sweat shops and electronics assembly lines.



of privilege, or alternatively agency, within society. For example, while one may exist within the hegemonic male class, they may also exist in the marginalized identity of black or LGBT. These varying degrees of oppression are also relative in a larger sense. The relative wealth of a person in the developed urban centers of the core nations<sup>6</sup> is vastly different from that of a person with a similar demographic breakdown in a rural area of a periphery or semi-periphery nation. By the standards I laid out earlier in this paper, any power one exerts in order to somehow break down the dichotomy becomes a false act of generosity. This is an inherent cognitive dissonance, a contradiction that must still exist in order to more fully define one's existence within the neoliberal framework.

My own work exists within this context, with a focus on the “white elephant”. This name comes from a tradition in ancient Siam wherein kings would give a gift of a white elephant to courtiers they disliked, in order to ruin them financially through the maintenance of such an animal. In my work, I impart my viewer with a visual “gift” that is accompanied by a mental burden. In the work I am discussing here, *Self Portrait (Embracing the things I can't let go)*, I impart a sensorial experience of my own making. The work contains several “skins” that the viewer can place upon their body in order to perform my identity to some degree. The idea of handling the skin of another person is disquieting, and grafting onto oneself even more so.

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<sup>6</sup> This is an important designation for what has previously been known as the developed world, or first world nations. There exist also semi-periphery nations, colloquially second world nations, and periphery nations, or “third-world”.



*Pachamama* from *Self Portrait (Embracing the things I can't let go)*, Mixed Media, Dante Migone-Ojeda, 2016. Dimensions Variable.

Thus, this set of “gifts” mimics the neoliberal false generosity, and subverts it as an inversion of the role of oppressor and oppressed. It simultaneously subverts the erasure inherent in neoliberalism through the performance of identity. The work of David Hammons is relevant to this assertion. His work, *Untitled*, is a testament to the very notion that the performance of identity can be a revolutionary act. The viewer’s discomfort at the explicit confrontation with another’s identity is proof of that.



*Untitled*, Margarine and Pigment on Paper, 1969, David Hammons.

I feel this direct connection to my experience and self is the crux of my thesis and argument. In the context of neoliberal influence, erasure of identity and component parts thereof is nearly universal. Broad terms come to define the experience of a multitude of people whose constituent identities are erased in favor of a demographic breakdown that allows the ruling elites to wield power and influence. Recall that the neoliberal system seeks to placate the working class. The language of nationalism that propagated through Latin America and the cohesion of ideology spread throughout the core reinforce this. Therefore, the organismic metaphor referred to above arises naturally from the need to reinforce worker unity and suppress the revolutionary impulse that may exist within the proletariat class. As an antidote to this enforced homogeneity, it is necessary to make a direct connection to the viewer. For example, my inclusion of alfajores is meant to establish a

fundamental link to my own personhood with little false generosity at play. While there is a hope that the consideration of the colonial history of alfajores<sup>7</sup> will arise upon the consumption, there is a fundamental tie to my childhood. It is simultaneously a familiar experience of eating a grandmother's cookies combined with the dissonance of a culturally foreign dessert. This offers a glimpse into the relevance of assemblage within my work.



Detail of *Self Portrait (Embracing the things I can't let go)*, Mixed Media, Dante Migone-Ojeda, 2016. Dimensions Variable.

In order to reclaim identity from the chasm of this structural violence, the alternative to this understanding of a society comes from the ideas of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, that of assemblages. DeLanda and Deleuze define an assemblage as “wholes characterized by *relations of*

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<sup>7</sup> Alfajores come originally from the southernmost region of Spain. There, the form they take is quite different from Latin America, more in the style of a small finger of flour, honey, and almonds than the cookies found across the Atlantic. The origins of the cookies can often be traced to the Argentine shores, where poor immigrants sought to imitate the Spanish elite as may be evidenced by the archaic and overly formal mode of language that developed in Argentina. The alfajor, however, was quickly adopted and transformed into a nearly unrecognizable object, with two round cookies sandwiching dulce de leche. This dessert became rapidly popular in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, states with near total eradication of the indigenous community, as a link to Spanish ancestry. Peru and the Andean Latin American nations, along with Mexico, also share the affinity for these cookies, though generally to a lesser degree than Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile.

*exteriority*” (DeLanda, 2006; 10). Fundamentally, this means that each component of an identity is exactly that: a component. There is no inherent sense of uniformity; a part of the whole may be removed and plugged into a separate whole and constitute an entirely different relation to the remainder of the parts (DeLanda, 2006; 11). This is essential to understanding the idea of intersectionality. While Deleuze and DeLanda both intend for this theory to be applied to a larger social fabric, DeLanda acknowledges the fractal nature of the theory when he says “...this implies that persons are not the only individual entities involved in social processes, but also individual communities, individual organizations, individual cities and individual nation-states” (DeLanda, 2006; 28). I posit that this societal fractalization is likewise influencing the individual person, and therefore can be used as a method to explore the individual as well as the societal, as each is mutually contingent.

By taking this idea into the world of art, I come to the logical conclusion of a self-portrait through a process of assemblage. My work physically manifests the ephemeral assemblage in the form of a series of boxes, each of which contains remnants, allegories, and objects directly related to the assemblage of my own identity. The components of the work are individually relevant, and thus function as works in their own right. But as in the theory of assemblage, the works create the whole only as they interact with one another. An advantage of this method of construction is that I am able to recreate identity however I see fit, flying in the face of the generality of neoliberalism.





Detail of *Self Portrait (Embracing the things I can't let go)*, Mixed Media, Dante Migone-Ojeda, 2016.

Dimensions Variable.

To some degree, assemblage in my work has its roots in the paradigm of printmaking. The notion of layering is inherently an assemblage process, and is central to printmaking as a medium. The ready dissemination of the print multiple also relates to the production and distribution of identity. This is not to say that the print medium is the only field of art-making that accesses the importance of assemblage theory. In particular, the work of Rashid Johnson serves for me as an inspiration to create the assemblage. Through the construction of shelves and the placement of objects upon those shelves, as well as the combination of photographic imagery and sensorial experience, Johnson creates an experiential representation of his life.



*BAADASSSSS*, 2011, Mirrored tile, black soap, wax, vinyl, shea butter, books, space rock, plant. Rashid Johnson. 70 3/4 x 119 1/2 x 11 3/4 in

The work of Francis Alÿs also serves as a point of contact, less as a direct exploration of the assemblage in art, and more so as an example of the assemblage at work. The transplant artist has adopted his new home in Mexico City and incorporated his community into his work, embracing even Mexican children's games into his videos. Doris Salcedo's work also heavily influenced me. Her



Still from *Children's Game 15 / Espejos*, Ciudad Juárez, 2013. Francis Alÿs.

work is located less in the realm of monument; rather, it gives form to the remnants of violence. Her work provided a unique insight into creating visual representation of identity.





*Plegaria Muda*, 2008-2010, tables, soil, grass. Doris Salcedo. Dimensions Variable.

As I have shown, there is historical precedence and a logical physical form that lends credence to the idea of a self-portrait through assemblage. Furthermore, it is an alternative to the imposed notions of self that the neoliberal system forces onto us in our daily life, and therefore forms a very new idea of self-portraiture. The traditional self-portrait focuses on the body, to varying degrees of abstraction. However, in the context of a utility driven system and economy, the body takes on a distinctly different meaning, codified by the signs and signifiers of the familiar identity politics that have been adopted by our society and encultured into our collective psyche. Therefore, this alternative to the self-portrait as a holistic depiction of the self is a powerful tool in resisting the erasure that the system employs. In our neoliberal art world, the erasure of the fragmented identities of a large swath of artists working today is commonplace; within such a system, it is vital to incorporate the concept of assemblage in order for the identities of these artists to survive.

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