

**Fiona Connor: *Closed for Installation,*
Fiona Connor, *SculptureCenter, #4***
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SculptureCenter



Fiona Connor, SculptureCenter, 2019, documentation of workshops, June 7-16, 2019. Courtesy SculptureCenter. Photo: Heidi Bohnenkamp.

Fiona Connor’s exhibition at SculptureCenter is composed of three pieces—two installed or taking place in the museum, and the other in the surrounding neighborhood, away from the spectator’s involvement. The first is a set of bronze-cast sculptures throughout the lower level galleries and courtyard; the second is the organization of an annual window cleaning in a nearby apartment, signaled to passersby by a modest plaque on the building; and lastly, collective workshops that Connor organized at the museum to produce an artist book.¹ In thinking how such divergent objects or actions coalesce, it is helpful to consider how each piece analyzes distinct forms of value production within the exhibitionary art system: value produced via the tools of institutional spectatorship and accessibility, maintenance, and collective participation. That being said, a primary concern that emerges is how to reconcile different models of organizing work against forces that foreclose collective potentiality.

In the years since the “liberal counter-reformation”—as French philosopher Gilles Châtelet referred to the neoliberal, reactionary global politics that Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan built atop the beaten corpse of May ’68²—work has become increasingly invisible and devastatingly precarious. Given this historical context, attention to “labor” in art, as elsewhere, has become ubiquitous. Rarely, however, is this interest organized in a way that mobilizes across various axes of

division; most often such attention speculates on other imaginaries—the troubled legacy of what was once referred to as “social practice” is perhaps the best example.³ When Connor and I discussed this concern over the phone, she remarked that many artistic projects around work as of late often fall for clichés (I think here of a common impulse to fetishize the working class or, worse yet, poverty), and that they often “reinforce categorizations or hierarchies.” On the latter point, consider the potential dangers in reifying the wage contract when agitating to recognize forms of typically invisibilized work. Connor’s exhibition proposes an elegant corrective (albeit mitigated by its institutional support): an analysis of the “latent heat of certain actions,” as she put it. I take this term to refer to the unrealized collective energy embedded in all our work, including attention, and the products or value that result from it. Connor’s move then, is to show this heat, in its sites of display, its geographic context, and its waste—three themes that can be used to analyze the varied acts of the exhibition.

Connor’s bronze sculptures are exhibited in the lower-level galleries, catacomb-like rooms that have been repurposed from former industrial zones (the museum used to be a repair shop for trolleys). In its brick-lined corridors and concrete cubicles, Connor has placed bronze-cast sculptures of tape measures, hammers, drills, and other tools used to install art exhibitions. Two bronzes continue into the inner courtyard, upstairs: a takeaway coffee-cup lid hidden among the rocks of the courtyard, and a stool. Exhibited alongside one another, the objects indicate the labor that comes before sanctioned spectating, before the proverbial “closed for installation” sign evoked by the title comes down.

The sculptures were produced in collaboration with a number of foundries in Los Angeles, where Connor has lived since 2009. A graduate of CalArts, her work is unmistakably informed by the legacies of storied artists who taught there and helped usher in West Coast Conceptualism—an influence that is particularly evident in Connor’s adept use of irony and her disruption of mechanisms of display.⁴ Though she arrived too late to study with Michael Asher, his 1974 installation at the Claire Copley Gallery, for which he removed the partition between the exhibition and office space, is a clear precedent for the first section of Connor’s exhibition. She similarly exhibits what is typically invisible, in her case the act of installing. But if Asher’s collapsing of the drywall divide between institutional display and administration left the gallery’s internal organs and functions bare, Connor’s exhibition freezes the moment when the administrative and the exhibitionary are *both* closed to the museum visitor. Considering these types of institutional “closures”—either physically closing the gallery wherein cleaning, installing, and other material labor takes place, or in sheltering its administrative functions (its funding, its cataloguing, and so on)—we can extrapolate the speculative “view in” Connor provides. Could this also be a scene or setting to consider the myriad other ways a (potential) public is shut out—from the hoarding of art in tax-haven storage to the asymmetrical regimes by which exhibited artists are typically selected?

The second piece of the exhibition is shared with the viewer only via a wall text and press release. Connor has arranged for the windows of a single apartment in the neighborhood to be cleaned annually. Accordingly, this work transpires in two sites of physical and financial exchange: the exterior of a certain apartment near the museum, and in the lease for that unit which now features this service clause in perpetuity. The viewer is not invited to this window cleaning, which is invisible as most domestic/sanitation labor continues to be; it remains between the parties involved: tenants (current and those to come), landlord, artist, and museum.

The slow violence of development that has dominated Long Island City, facilitated by consistent up-zonings during the last three decades, is harrowingly apparent. Citi Tower, built in 1990 and just down the way from the museum, signaled the neighborhood’s shift from an industrial zone to one of commercial office space and

luxury housing. This transition became most prominent around 2012, when the neighborhood became one of the fastest developing areas in the country. Connor mentioned to me that she could sense this as she developed the exhibition, walking from the train station to the museum. Produced as part of a series of performance-based works as micro-interventions reminiscent of Conceptualist “dematerialization” in line with Lawrence Weiner’s *Declaration of Intent* (1968), this piece’s focus is perhaps as zoomed-in to a site as one can get when analyzing the double binds involved in displacement and investment, or art and gentrification. Rather than solely paying attention to the physical elements of the site, and its spatial content/context, Connor scores this action into a leasing contract: a way of entering the real estate infrastructure of the neighborhood from a hyper-local position. Leaving the museum, whether to find the apartment building in question or not, we’re implored to stare up at the windows of the glass towers menacingly blocking the sun all around us.

The third and last piece takes place in the brick and mortar of the museum. Connor organized a series of workshops in which visitors worked collaboratively to turn some of the museum’s recyclable waste into editioned artist books, which act as the exhibition catalogue. Spectators are thus positioned as workers when they come together to collectively shred, pulp, screen print, and shrink wrap (the final products reproduce the names of all those who worked to produce them). Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s germinal *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* (1969) comes to mind. Ukeles famously advanced a double linguistic shift from domestic work to maintenance, and from maintenance to art in the manifesto. Less recalled, however, is the second part of the text, which proposed an exhibition titled *CARE* that would invite sanitation workers and scientists into the museum to recycle waste. Ukeles’s proposition critically points to the potential power of the multitude to fill the holes of austerity. And, while both Ukeles and Connor clearly reference the need to materially entangle production and reproduction, the latter artist points to smaller-scale collective models that refuse growth and extraction, by repurposing the waste produced by the exhibition to document itself. Unlike sometimes-ostentatious artistic propositions that attempt consciousness-raising while staking a complicit-as-given position, or that enmesh themselves in the philanthropy-industrial complex to prove a point, Connor’s work does not necessarily propose scalable solutions to the myriad conflicts I evoke. Nor, in a materialist sense, does she engage politically with the contradictions to do with art and waste, extraction and production, and so on. Her project’s avoidance of proposing solutions to such structural problems is, perhaps, a way of accepting the potentiality of art as a pedagogical and collective tool, while knowing it will remain, in part, leisure as commodity.

Connor’s exhibition is not (just) an allegorical or mimetic engagement with the many negotiations to do with art working and its productive forms. She also collapses different methods, contracts, and modes of labor into an imperative for the careful observation of how art works. The exhibition does not position work on a pedestal, but rather on the floor and outside. It has become summarily clear that the many models and revamps of institutional critique often work to serve themselves and the sponsor—the latter of which acts as the target of scorn and/or a humble commissioner. Importantly, however, Connor reminds us (as Ukeles and others have done in the past) that rather than venerating the work ethic, wage, or product, we should instead locate the spectator, artist, foundry worker, window cleaner, tenant, and so on, alongside one another—and only then can we form collective power.

Endnotes

1. I took part in the first of these workshops.
2. Gilles Châtelet, *To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies*, trans. Robin Mackay (Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2014).
3. A valid doubt, of course, is whether art can even provide a platform for such investigations at all, let alone for organizing ourselves.
4. Connor conducted interviews with Suzanne Lacy and John Baldessari, among many other West Coast Conceptualists, for the exhibition *Experimental Impulse (2011)* at REDCAT in Los Angeles, part of *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA, 1945–1980*; they can be accessed here: soundcloud.com/fiona-connor/tracks.