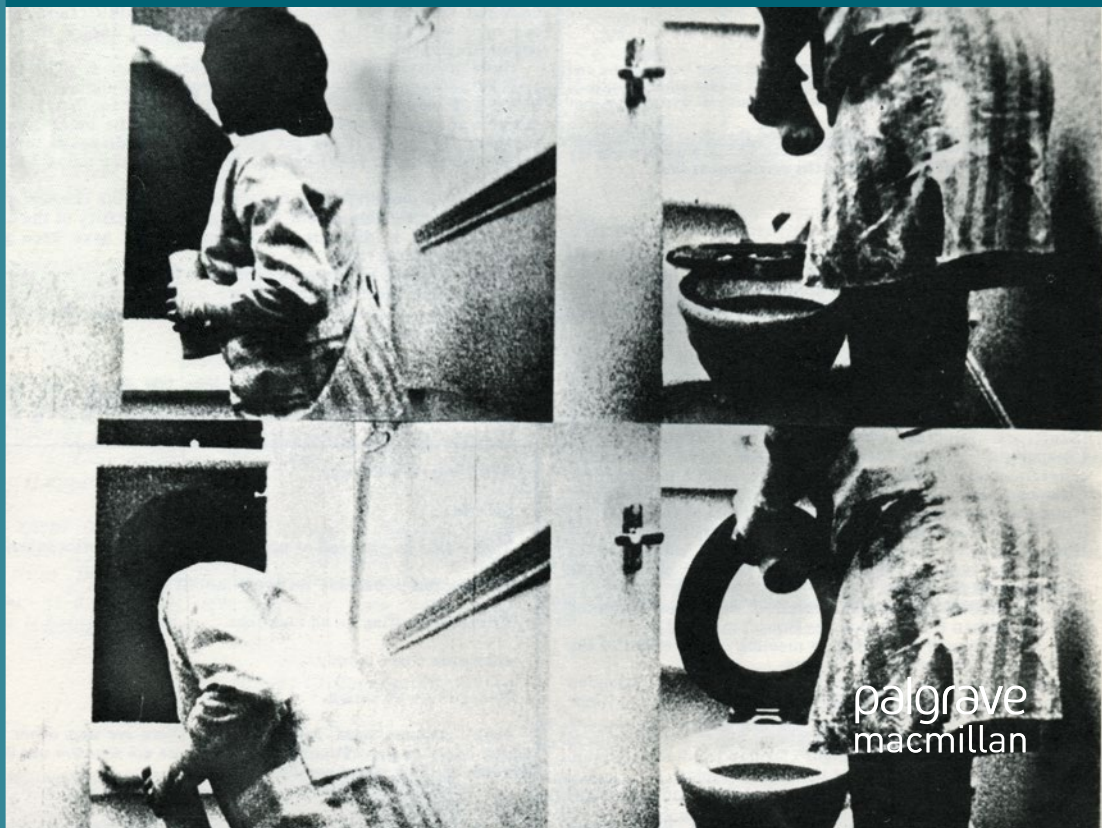
Performative Representation of Working-Class Laborers

They Work Hard for the Money

Edited by
Jennifer Vanderpool · Colin Gardner



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To all of our working colleagues

Acknowledgements

Performative Representation of Working-Class Laborers is a transdisciplinary anthology intersecting working-class studies with art history, film and media studies, performance art, art theory praxis, and the disciplines of community, ethnic, and gender studies. We followed different avenues becoming involved in the field.

Colin Gardner's interest in working-class studies derives from earlier research on the events of May 1968 in Paris as well as Godard's film *British Sounds*, which features a major contribution from the British Feminist activist Sheila Rowbotham, who also plays a key role in *Nightcleaners* and its sequel. This was central to his last book, *Chaoid Cinema* (2021), which explored sound drop-outs and blank screens as a means of supplementing working-class and feminist political content with a more affective register that moved beyond a straightforward Brechtian approach (which dominated 1970s film theory) towards what Raymond Williams calls 'structures of feeling'.

Jennifer Vanderpool is a storyteller who values questioning equity issues through art-making. She weaves together a prosthetic memory, knitting together stories from her Ukrainian grandparents who settled in the Mahoning Valley in 1965, with her experiences growing up in the Rust Belt. Embracing the blue-collar region of northeast, Ohio, empowered her to study the social construction of the labouring classes and our cities based on the historical influences of place, work, race, class, and gender to unveil the human cost of insecure employment in post-prosperity locales in her multidisciplinary art practice.

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Jennifer Vanderpool would like to thank her parents, Ray and Maggie Vanderpool for their support in realizing this project, which began as her dissertation. Thanks also to her studio assistant, Alexandria Ivory.

Contents

Notes on Contributors

Paula Albuquerque is a Portuguese artist and scholar living in Amsterdam. She is a senior researcher at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. Albuquerque's artworks have been shown in solo exhibitions at galleries such as Looiersgracht 60 (2023); Nieuw Dakota (2020); Bradwolff Projects (2023, 2018, 2015); former Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (2016), and at film festivals such as the International Film Festival in Rotterdam (2016); and Sheffield DOC|Fest (2020). She published the books *Enter the Ghost—Haunted Media Ecologies* (2020) and *The Webcam as an Emerging Cinematic Medium* (2018). Albuquerque regularly presents her research at conferences, including at *Media in Transition* at MIT; *NECS*; and *Visible Evidence*.

Ryan Bramley is a lecturer, filmmaker, and arts-based researcher based at the University of Sheffield's School of Education. His research interests, whilst diverse, are linked by the overarching themes of media representation and storytelling. He regularly critiques how minoritised people and populations—from working-class mining communities, to members of the Windrush Generation—are represented in documentaries, literature, news coverage, etc. His PhD, 'In Their Own Image' (2021), explored voluntary filmmaking as a community-building practice in England's post-industrial North. Bramley advocates for more collaborative approaches to producing and telling stories *with* people, rather than about them—including participatory video methods and creative writing workshops. He played a fundamental role in establishing a new 'PhD-by-Practice' programme at the University of Sheffield, enabling doctoral students to create

their own arts-based research. Bramley is the grandson of a miner, the son of a steelworker, and considers himself an academic of working-class heritage.

Colin Gardner is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Critical Theory and Integrative Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he taught in the departments of Art, Film and Media Studies, the History of Art and Architecture and the Comparative Literature program. His most recent monograph is *Chaoid Cinema: Deleuze and Guattari and the Topological Vector of Silence* (2021), which explores the use of sonic drop-outs in sound films in order to explore different organizations of chaos (Chaoids) that underlie the surface plane of narrative. This builds upon his previous book, *Beckett, Deleuze and the Televisual Event: Peephole Art* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), a critical study of Samuel Beckett's experimental work for film and television and two books for Manchester University Press' 'British Film Makers' series: *Joseph Losey* (2004) and *Karel Reisz* (2006). He has also co-edited two anthologies with Patricia MacCormack (Anglia Ruskin University): *Deleuze and the Animal* (2017) and *Ecosophical Aesthetics: Art Ethics and Ecology with Guattari* (2018).

Alexis Hudgins is a visual artist and scholar whose practice incorporates video, performance, installation, sculpture and writing. With experience working in reality television and later as a producer for artist Paul McCarthy, her work addresses the implications of labour within contemporary cultural production and creative practices. Hudgins started as a production assistant in reality television in the early 2000s on *America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway* and *Wife Swap*, working her way up to a producer. Between 2011 and 2016, she was a producer for Paul and Damon McCarthy. Hudgins' professional work in both of these arenas continues to inform her research as a doctoral candidate in the PhD Program in Art History, Theory and Criticism with a concentration in Art Practice at the University of California at San Diego. She has a BA in Art History from Emory University, a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) from Calarts and Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) from University of California at Los Angeles, both in Photography.

Farrah Karapetian works with photography in an expanded field. She leads the photography area of the Department of Art, Architecture + Art History at the University of San Diego. Her applied theatrical strategies posit that working with narratives of the agency of individuals in the face

of political or personal change can honor the experiences of participants, slow down and capture elements of contemporary life's slippery photographic circulation, and reveal parts of micro-political culture that evade the dramatic binaries of media's algorithms. Karapetian's artwork is in multiple public collections. She is a recipient of a City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowship (2020), a Fulbright Fellowship to Russia (2018), a Pollock-Krasner Award (2017), a California Community Foundation Mid-Career Artist Fellowship (2014), and a Warhol Arts Writers Grant (2013), among other honors. She holds an MFA from the University of California at Los Angeles and a BA from Yale University.

Diran Lyons is an assistant professor, Porterville College. His art practice is heavily conceptual with exacting craft and edgy content, including video and photography, collage and painting, indoor and outdoor installation, performance, and critical writing. Lyons's work often highlights the complex web of power dynamics between the artist, audience, and art institution as a trusted purveyor of museological discourse. He has exhibited at the Gulf Coast Museum of Art in Largo, FL, and at the Fresno, CA, venues Corridor 2122 Gallery, Gallery 25, and Ruud Gallery. His political remix videos have been featured by mainstream news and magazine sites and the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria. He holds a BA in Painting and Drawing from California State University, Fresno, and an MFA in New Genres and Painting from the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he was a Regents Fellow.

Hương Ngô and Hồng-Ân Trương are two artists whose interdisciplinary collaborative work stems from their lived experiences growing up as Vietnamese refugees. Their work both begins in and reconfigures the archive to reimagine it as historical, highly personal, and inextricable from our current political realities. Their work has been supported by the MoMA (New York, NY), the MCA Chicago (IL), the Nasher Museum (Durham, NC), the Phillips Collection (Washington, DC), SPACES Cleveland (OH) and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art (Houston, TX). They are working on a permanent commission for the new international arrivals terminal for the Chicago O'Hare Airport.

Annika Olsson is Docent/Associate Professor in Comparative Literature and Dean of the Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University. She is an expert on documentary literature, photography, and film, and the

relationship between representations and democratic societies. She wrote her thesis on report books and the problem of giving voice inspired by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and postcolonial feminist theory (*Att ge den andra sidan röst. Rapportboken I Sverige 1960-1980 / To Give Voice. The Report-Book in Sweden 1960-1980*, 2002). Olsson has written articles on representation, intersectionality, oral history, gender equality, and literary history. She is one of the founders of Oral History in Sweden, member of the Nordic network of Working-Class Literature and is working on a book on public intellectuals in Sweden. One of her latest published articles is "Grotesque Bodies in the Swedish Folkhem. Improper Aesthetic and Rhetoric" in the magazine *Puss* 1968–1974: http://mau.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1619795/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Jacob Rowlett is a PhD candidate at San Diego State University and the University of California at Santa Barbara. As a researcher, he is particularly interested in the impact of film in relation to human environments. His research spans across the fields of critical geography, tourism studies, and film theory and history. His current work is focused on the Skellig Coast communities of Ireland and the spatial impacts that have arisen out of the production of Star Wars films in the area. Rowlett's work seeks to understand the complicated relationships between tourist industries, stakeholders, and tourists themselves when community spaces become entwined with popular culture. In addition to his research, Rowlett is engaged with fan communities around the world. He has presented on convention panels at both Star Wars Celebration Europe and San Diego International Comic-Con where he brought a critical cultural geography perspective to pop cultural conversations.

P. J. Starr is a filmmaker, photographer, curator, and advocate for the rights of sex workers, immigrants and the LGBT communities. They are a queer immigrant parent with experience garnering income in informal sectors since age 11. Their creative projects build community across cultures, borders and intellectual divides. They have made a number of films including the award nominated feature documentary *No Human Involved* (2016). They are working on the forthcoming feature film *Manifesting Monica Jones*. Their photography has been featured at the Sex Worker Rights Pop Up in New York (2020), the Philadelphia Museum of Art and at the CREA World Conference in Nepal in 2019. In 2023 they were shortlisted for a Creative Capital Award for Multimedia Performance and Socially Engaged Performance Theater in partnership with The Incredible,

Edible Akynos. Starr is the founder of Moral High Ground Productions that is dedicated to better portrayals of marginalized communities on screen and founder of several organizations working for the rights of sex workers.

Jennifer Vanderpool is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, and writer based in Los Angeles, California. A native of northeast Ohio, she draws on her immigrant Ukrainian family's working-class stories as a lens questioning the social construction of place based on the influences of history, race, class, gender, and labor. She explores workers' lives and cities through her global community-specific and site-responsive exhibitions. Vanderpool's exhibitions have been funded by the US-UK Fulbright Commission, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Ohio Arts Council, Kunstrådet: Danish Arts Council, Kulturrådet: Swedish Arts Council, Malmö Stad, and Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time—A Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-Funded Partnership. The National Endowment for the Arts co-awarded her funding for a California community art collaboration. The Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts and the National Endowment for the Art have supported her collaborative curation projects.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Jennifer Vanderpool and Colin Gardner

The curtain rises and the performance begins. "We are posting that labor is of central importance to art making," argue artists Jessica Stockholder and Joe Scanlan in their essay "Art and Labor: Some Introductory Ideas" (2005: 50). We agree. Stockholder and Scanlan note that, historically, creative production has been interwoven with materials and the manipulation of these goods as a mode of cognition, differentiating it from "thoughts generated while seated at a desk" (2005: 50). Yet, the intellectual efforts of physical labor and thinking in an office generating ideas that require action in order to be realized are not so dissimilar. Artists used to make objects by hand, "more eccentric impulses than those generated by the making of life's necessities," but many contemporary practitioners craft our artwork through the process of identifying, consuming, manipulating, and assembling goods we cannot afford to buy (2005). We collect and utilize commodities fabricated by anonymous labourers working on the

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assembly line of global production—performative creative production. It is a luxury.

"Performative" is a challenging term to define, contends playwright and Performance Studies scholar Richard Schechner (Schechner, "Performativity" 2006: 123). Sometimes, it is used precisely, but oftentimes, it is bandied about, suggesting a performance but not the formal trappings of a theater stage and an attentive audience. It is both a noun identifying "a word or sentence that does something," and an adjective suggesting "performance-like qualities." The chapters included in *Performative Representation of Labour: They Work Hard for the Money* encompass family stories reflecting on our grandparents and parents who perform manual, physical, and hourly labour, but not unskilled, enabling us to portray their stories or perhaps how their stories working in the mills, mines, and auto plants impacted our realities. Some of us are immigrants, and others grew up in immigrant families. Our families attained "good paying" industrial jobs and enacted the cultural codes of their communities. We write about place and how economic downturns created financial precarity in our homes and cities and, in some instances, defined them. Other writers offer critical discussions of how emerging Western capitalism fabricated the colonial global working class, while late capitalist neoliberalism perpetuates workers' disempowerment. Some authors discuss the written and filmic representation of these stories. We struggle with empowering workers' voices yet critically investigating and analysing the theme of "working" without speaking over the workers or misunderstanding and consequently misrepresenting communities.[1]

An obvious theoretical basis for any analysis of class and labour is the dialectical and historical materialist approach of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels where the main objective of any revolution is for the working class to obtain equal rights to the means of production, thereby reinforcing the fundamental Base/Superstructure model of political economy. However, this also raises a key question: what is the role of art and performance in such a rigidly structured class-based model? On the one hand we have the Frankfurt School's advocacy of an autonomous art object divorced from all social and political influence (not unlike Clement Greenberg's Modernist Formalism where the artwork refers only to its own formal structure). Herbert Marcuse, for example, argued that art can never take on a political stance without destroying itself (i.e. it is always co-opted) so

[1] Essay summaries can be found at the beginning of each chapter throughout the book.

that it must exist as an autonomous realm in and of itself. Theodor Adorno agreed, arguing that art and nature exist as polar opposites, which allows them to be mutually mediated in and through each other. Not surprisingly, Adorno hated mimetic realism, which explains his aversion to the indexical and representational properties of cinema (he conveniently ignores its more performative and distancing aspects, which, as several of the book's essays demonstrate, are a key component of many depictions of alienated labour). As Adorno argues:

> The photographic process of film, primarily representational, places a higher intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity, than aesthetically autonomous techniques; this is the retarding aspect of film in the historical process of art. Even where film dissolves and modifies its objects as much as it can, the disintegration is never complete. Consequently, it does not permit absolute construction: its elements, however abstract, always retain something representational; they are never purely aesthetic values. (Adorno 1981–2: 202)

Countering this argument is the contemporaneous work of Bertolt Brecht. Although he is best known for his Epic Theatre and Marxist *Lehrstücke* or "learning plays" of the early 1930s, which eliminated all actor-audience separation in favour of a performative dialogue, Brecht's early work (e.g. *Baal*, 1918) was noted for its focus on the sensual and bodily affect as the main trigger for political awareness and activism. This is an inherently Spinozist approach to the relationship between art and politics, "For in Spinozism," noted Deleuze, "all power bears with it a corresponding and inseparable capacity to be affected" (1992: 93). In *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari describe an intricate interrelationship between the powers of concepts (which take effect on a plane of immanence) and affects and percepts (which are laid down on a plane of composition). The result is that "Art thinks no less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts" (1994: 66).

Another poststructuralist, aesthetically based breakdown of the Base-Superstructure model can be found in Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation, a form of "hailing," ("Hey, you!") which absorbs us into the structures of language as soon as we respond ("Who, me?"). This is what Fredric Jameson calls "The Prison-House of Language": (1975) whereby all challenges to the status-quo are always already co-opted by the language that encompasses and defines us. It's significant that Althusser sees

art's affective and performative function (following Spinoza's *Ethics*, it is always grounded in the body as well as the mind) as a viable resistance to this *fait accompli*. As he explains it:

> I believe that the peculiarity of art is to "make us see" (*nous donner à voir*), "make us perceive," "make us feel" something which *alludes* to reality. […] What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of "*seeing*," "*perceiving*" and "*feeling*" (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*. (Althusser 1971: 222)

The connections to Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or distancing device are obvious but at the same time Althusser is fully aware that we never fully escape the all-encompassing nature of interpellation, that the performative task of art is never-ending and is always in a state of becoming. This is largely because art introduces somatic desire into the realm of political thought which is itself fraught with potential problems as it is also the driving force of fascism (not just the historical fascism of Mussolini but also the fascism in us all). In his insightful "Preface" to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Michel Foucault raises a key question central to the essays in this book: "How does one introduce desire into thought, into discourse, into action? How can and must desire deploy its forces within the political domain and grow more intense in the process of overturning the established order? *Ars erotica*, *ars theoretica*, *ars politica*" (1983: xii). In order to curb our individual desire for power, we must undergo a process of de-individualisation and embrace difference over uniformity, flows and becomings over fixed unities. In short:

> Do not demand of politics that it restore the "rights" of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to "de-individualize" by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization. (1983: xiv)

Affect thus acts as a form of collective becoming, embracing the performative and somatic as desiring-machines that deterritorialise collective unities rather than reterritorialise them into traditional unities (such as political parties and trade unions).

A major underlying aesthetico-political strategy that runs throughout the book (especially in Diran Lyons' chapter on Political Remix Video) is Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of the "creative lie," whereby "art is the opposite of a 'disinterested' operation: it does not heal, calm, sublimate or pay off, it does not 'suspend' desire, instinct or will. On the contrary, art is a 'stimulant of the will to power', 'something that excites willing' " (Deleuze 1983: 102). In other words, "art is the highest power of falsehood, it magnifies the 'world as error', it sanctifies the lie; the will to deception is turned into a superior ideal" (1983: 102). The following quote from Nietzsche's "On the Pathos of Truth" neatly sums up the performative role of art in the politics of the book's essays: "Art is more powerful than knowledge, because *it* desires life, whereas knowledge attains as its final goal only—annihilation" (1979: 66). In other words, the curtain never closes but always remains open for future performances.

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CHAPTER 2

Performative Representations of Working Class Labour as Language Games

Jennifer Vanderpool

An over-the-road truck driver, who travelled between the downtown Detroit plant and its suburban extension, wandered up and down the dark aisles of the Clark Street Cadillac factory, staring aghast at the empty bays of department 1308 (Hernandez 2004: 108–109).[1] There were no air guns or plug guns. The block washer at the top of line one and the engine cold-start fuel and exhaust line were also gone. There was no coffee machine. There were no people. And then he saw her, Abbie Wilson, affectionately nicknamed "Cousin Cake from 1308" by her co-workers, appreciating the pound cakes she baked for them. He watched, fascinated as Abbie performed some sort of ritual or dance, swiveling, bending, raising her hands, turning, and raising her hands again. Eventually, feeling

[1] This paragraph is a summary of the protagonist Abbie's performance in Lolita Hernandez's short story "Thanks to Abbie Wilson," included in her collection *Autopsy of an Engine: And Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004, pp. 99–114.

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part of whatever it was she was doing, he heard the buzzing, whirring, and humming machinery as the labourers worked in concert assembling cast-iron 472 engines for sleek Eldorados. He left and returned with his buddy who used to drive hi-los. They walked up and down the aisles dumbfounded. Abbie waved. They didn't realize it was at them. She was part of the scene, a film reenactment. In the following days, other reallocated and early retired workers trickled in to experience their bygone lives working on the motor line. Abbie left pieces of cake in Tupperware containers for them, arranged on a makeshift cardboard box table, covered it with a tablecloth, and decorated it with a vase of orange silk flowers. They wrote Abbie notes thanking her. She collected them for her scrapbook. Several years after Abbie's performance, all production ceased at the Clark Street Plant. The Sunday after the announcement, Abbie returned home from church, unsure if she could continue cleaning the silent factory. She reported to her kitchen. Abbie baked pound cake after pound cake, stacking them up the stairs and around the house. She baked until she could no longer bake. Abbie cleared a spot on the couch to read her former colleagues' notes. " 'Thanks to Abbie Wilson,' the note said. 'I had one more taste of life. Your best friend, Curry'."

In her short story, "Thanks to Abbie Wilson," Lolita Hernandez portrays a vignette of trauma experienced by displaced autoworkers, many of whom were black and Latinx men and women, according to American and working-class studies scholar Sherry Lee Linkon (2018b: 36). Hernandez's protagonist Abbie performed the memory of collaborative assembly line work, and through the process of encoding this remembrance of labour into action, she staged what playwright and performance studies scholar Richard Schechner identifies as a secular ritual (2006: 52, 53). Abbie enveloped the geography of the Clark Street factory in the aftermath of the 1987 reallocated manufacturing and played her former self in a non-theatrical production of department 1308, eliminating actors, plots, rehearsals, and single staging areas with an audience. Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott explains that the concept of 'play' is "an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living" (1971: 67). He argues that playing is not an inner psychic reality; it is outside the individual but not the external world. Playing herself and embodying her former co-workers in this secular ritual of their assembly line labour enabled Abbie to exist in what Schechner identifies as a "second reality" separate from everyday life (2006).

Enacting her former assembly line work, Abbie experienced "imaginative self-transformation," which functions as a device to frame occurrences of pain and imaging, the perceptual boundaries of the human psyche, and is the act of creating an object that did not previously exist, an artwork, contends American and English literature scholar Elaine Scarry (1985: 165, 170–171). Abbie's self-transformation resulted from her directed intentionality of imagining the collective efforts necessary to build motors on the redundant assembly line. She worked shifts as a janitor cleaning the Clark Street facility after GM dissolved department 1308 and, during her lunch break, returned to her empty assembly line bay. She waited for Gary to put in the front plate bolts, her eyes wandering around the plant floor as she imaginatively reconstructed the bays and her co-workers. Abbie mentioned to Vernell how much she missed Curry since he died a year before the assembly line shuttered (Hernandez 2004). She saw Fabulous Freddy on the number four piston and said to him, "Hey Freddy, I got some pound cake for you." The engine moved down the line, she manoeuvred herself to tighten the bolts. Abbie left a pound cake for Freddy on the railing near his bay the following day.

Abbie engaged in "dark play," a form of play described by Schechner that encompasses risky and deceptive behaviour, subverts order, dissolves socio-cultural framing devices, self-referentially breaks its own rules and sometimes self-destructs while hiding its agenda and rewarding its disruption (2006: 119). Her repetitive actions of turning, bending, and raising her hands fabricated a spatial drawing, codified as an ideogram, symbolizing individual workers' efforts in the collective production (1998, 2003: 174). These gestures created a social bond between herself, the performer-inquirer, the addressee-audience of her assembled former co-workers watching her performance, and the referent-autoworker ghosts. An interdisciplinary scholar working across the fields of philosophy, literary theory, and sociology, Jean-François Lyotard observed that the social bond created by telling a narrative "is itself a language game, the game of inquiry" (1984a: 15). Abbie's gestures performing the obsolete work functioned as a device, like an actor in an epic theatre production who intentionally replicates movements to draw attention to them as symbols. She repeated the movements of labourers working on the assembly line, the symbolic code of the redundant waged body, enabling her audience of former co-workers to relate the performance to their memories of work. As spectators, they collectively experienced the industrial cacophony of the