

A Meditation on the Relationship between Physical Labor and the Creation of Meaning

Instructions for Re-Creating P.T. Barnum's 1860s-Era
"BrickMan" Advertising Stunt at SUNY Purchase, November 2006

Prepared by Peter Walsh as an Adaptation of his Re-Creation Performed in 2001.

Materials:

Five ordinary red bricks
One pair of work gloves
One hand counter for keeping tally of circuits
One shoelace to hang the hand counter around the performer's neck

Location:

Any space that can function as the four corners of a city intersection, with room to walk from corner to corner.

Who:

Any individual or group of individuals. The original stunt was performed by a man, but the re-creation should include both women and men.

Background:

Sometime in the early 1860s, impresario P.T. Barnum staged a live performance designed to "prove" that he could create value out of thin air by making money from "nonsense" labor. Hiring an unemployed working man to place bricks on each of the four corners of the intersection in front of his American Museum in Lower Manhattan, Barnum's advertising stunt was intended to draw an audience into the museum on the southeast corner. According to his autobiography, Barnum commanded his Brick Man "with the fifth brick in hand, [to] take a rapid march from one point to the other, making the circuit, exchanging [his] brick at every point." As crowds would form to see what the trickster Barnum could be up to, his Brick Man would enter the Museum each hour with dozens of paying customers following behind him – and Barnum's point was "proved."

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Instructions:

Identify a location and a group of participants. Place a brick on each of the four corners. Each participant should perform for at least 10 minutes by putting on the gloves, taking the fifth brick in one hand and the hand counter in the other and beginning Barnum's "rapid march from one point to the other, making the circuit, exchanging [the] brick at every point." The march should be counter clockwise like the original and each circuit should be tallied on the counter. Participants can invite viewers and passersby to walk the circuit with them. Discussion is encouraged. The performance should continue for at least one half hour or for as long as there are participants willing to carry the bricks.

Notes to Participants from Peter Walsh:

This set of instructions differs from Barnum's on several points, the most significant being that there is no "destination" for the Brick Man. He or she never arrives at the Museum. As an artist engaged in the creation of "intangible" value through the use of commercially unproductive labor, I share an affinity with Barnum's proto-dada shenanigans. My goal, when I re-created the performance in 2001, was to use my own artistic practice to create an artist's micro-model of classic liberal economic practice - the closed circuit of capital - and to make that model a crucial first step towards examining the mechanisms that shape our current system of free-market capitalism. As in Barnum's original stunt, the bricks became physical stand-ins for human labor, for the potential of that labor to build the world anew, and for money itself.

For the performance at SUNY Purchase, I encourage students and other performers to use the simple methodical action of rotating the bricks as a way to meditate on the connection between the real, physical, time-based nature of their labor and the layered meanings that they will be creating. I hope that the performance will set into motion new ideas that connect Barnum's intentions in the 1860s with my intentions in 2001 and their own here in 2006.

Thanks and good luck!