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Gross Domestic People of the 21st Century

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GROSS DOMESTIC PEOPLE OF THE 21ST CENTURY: A TRANSMEDIA ARCHIVE OF CONTEMPORARY WORKING CULTURE

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Digital Arts and New Media

by

Ian Mark Newman

June 2018

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ........................................................................................................ iv

Abstract ....................................................................................................................... 1

Dedication ..................................................................................................................... 3

Acknowledgement ........................................................................................................ 4

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5

Literature/Historical Context Review ........................................................................ 8

Collaborative Authorship/Collaborative Ownership ................................................. 41

What happened to the Union Vision(s)? ................................................................. 46

Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 60

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 70-72
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE. 1: Woman Ironing (Isis), 2008, Digital C-Print ..........................5


FIGURE. 3: Untitled, 1996, Silver Gelatin Print ..............................16

FIGURE. 4: Bethlehem, PA (1986), USA, 1986, Silver Gelatin Print ......18

FIGURE. 5: Washerwoman, 1930, Silver Gelatin Print ......................20

FIGURE. 6: Category Keyword Pate, 2018, Screen Capture ...............26

FIGURE. 7: People Category Page, 2018, Screen Capture .................27

FIGURE. 8: Splash Page, 2018, Screen Capture .............................28

FIGURE. 9: Technical Construction of Archive, 2018, Screen Capture ....29

FIGURE. 10: Portrait Library, 2018, Screen Capture ......................29

FIGURE. 11: I Sketch by UC Student Workers Union member Daniel Rudin, 2018, Colored Pencil on Notebook Paper ......................32
FIGURE.12: Ideation, creation, application of images, 2018, Screen Capture..................................................................................................................35

FIGURE.13: Ideation, creation, application of images, 2018, Screen Capture ..................................................................................................................36

FIGURE.14: Ideation, creation, and application of images, 2018, Screen Capture ..................................................................................................................36

FIGURE.15: Theresa, Collaborative Portrait, 2018, Screen Capture......37

FIGURE.16: Theresa, Collaborative Portrait applied to UC Student Workers Bargaining rally, 2018, Screen Capture.........................................................38

FIGURE.17: UC Student Worker' Union Bargaining Rally.....................39

FIGURE.18: Union Propaganda, 2012, Screen Capture.........................48

FIGURE.19: Union Propaganda, 2012, Screen Capture.........................48

FIGURE.20: Union Propaganda, 2012, Screen Capture.........................49

FIGURE.21: Union Propaganda, 2012, Screen Capture .........................49

FIGURE.22: Bank of America online Advertisement.................................52

FIGURE.23: General Strike!, 1916, Poster Print.................................54
FIGURE 24: *Together We Can Do It*, 1942, Poster Print.........................56

FIGURE 25: MFA Thesis Show Installation, 2018, Digital File..................61

FIGURE 26: Questions for Participants, 2018, Digital File......................68

FIGURE 27: Questions for Participants, 2018, Digital File......................69
ABSTRACT
Ian Newman
Gross Domestic People of the 21st Century

Gross Domestic People of the 21st Century is a trans-media online archive, but it is also a project about perception, narrativization, and how a collaborative portrait process can impact the visual culture of labor. This project applies a variety of theoretical, political and social theories that emerge through the class of propaganda materials created with workers as a collaborative effort. This collaborative effort amounts to a “photographic social practice,1” which engages and provides agency to workers who articulate the direction of their visual culture of labor in a 21st Century context.

The archive is comprised of photographs, videos, audio interviews and digital sketches of (mainly) union workers employed within industries of socioeconomic transition.2 These workers offer

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1 Socially engaged practice describes art that is collaborative, often participatory and involves people as the medium or material of the work; http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice

2 An “industry in transition” is any industry that is experiencing rapid deterioration of existing socioeconomic norms.
testimonies, thoughts, reflections, and constructed imagery to make to impact their visual culture. In hopes of revitalizing a collective voice, union workers collaborated with me to create useable and relevant propaganda. Workers had the full agency to create, expand, and delimit the visual culture of labor through their stories and images. In this light, I invite the reader to peruse and investigate the totality of the project.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis project to my family: Vicky Newman, Martin Newman, Bonnie Kotkin, Richard Kotkin and Andrew and Michelle Gaines.

Without your support I would be lost in this world.

I love you all so very much.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This endeavor was made possible with the endless advice, critique, and friendship offered by the Principal faculty of DANM, faculty of Art and faculty of Film and Digital Media. Thank you Sharon Daniel, Rick Prelinger, Tra Bouscaren, Jennifer Gonzalez, Jennifer Parker, Dee Hibbert-Jones, and Soraya Murray for pushing me to reach beyond my comfort, I cannot thank you enough for your guidance throughout my time at Santa Cruz.

Thank you to all of the workers and individuals who participated: United Auto Workers Local 2865, UAW Local 1853, American Federation of Teachers of Santa Cruz, the UC Student Workers Union, IBEW Local 234 who provided their time, energy, and willingness to participate in this project. A special thank you to Ana McTaggart, Daniel Rudin, Abigail Schultz, Avi Kaushik, Jeb Purucker, Kyle Galindez, Roxanne Powers, Anthony Breakspear, Theresa Hice, Tent Gillete, Robin King, Gustavo Vasquez, and Michael Rotkin.

To my DANM cohort and their willingness to push me to a higher standard. Thank you for your grace, patience, time, advice and encouragement.
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Thank you to the countless hours, effort and excellent production quality produced by my intern, Sydney Christopher. There are so many aspects of this project that wouldn’t have been possible without your dedication, thirst for learning and the professionalism you displayed throughout the course of the project.
Introduction

Gross Domestic people of the 21st Century is an artistic intervention into organized labor’s poor visual culture and the possibilities of propaganda that a radical turn to portrait photography could produce. Union workers employed in industries of transition\(^1\) elaborate on their vision, thoughts, and experiences of working in contemporary American society. As the workers provide an alternative visual narrative through a series of interviews and collaborative portraits, what emerges in the content of this project is also a meditation on social and political issues frequently encountered in the 21st Century workplace.

While a majority of American workers\(^2\) express their desire to be part of a unionized labor force, the visual culture of labor continues to be among the poorest of quality and focus of its membership. The necessity to redefine an American union visuality is more important now than ever before. American unions brace for legal attacks to the public sector putting

\(^1\) An “industry in transition” is any industry that is experiencing rapid deterioration of existing socioeconomic norms.

millions of workers at risk,\textsuperscript{3} while membership numbers decline. In this respect, how can vast numbers of unorganized workers unionize when a visual culture of labor is always on the defensive? How can workers organize when our popular culture elevates the position of the individual over the union? Does an alternative narrative exist?

Organized labor mainly communicates its visual image through photographic media and so the power of solidarity is theorized and grounded in being read from below.\textsuperscript{4} Despite the degrees of separation in our globalized workplace and interventions of technology, we should be in solidarity with workers that have the opportunity to engage in direct action. In doing so, it might also be possible to convince non-union workers to organize and invest in labor’s visual culture.

Developing robust images is an important and distinct feature of cultural production that many unions miss outside of a campaign context.

\textsuperscript{3} The Supreme Court Of the United States decision on Janus V AFSCME at the end of June 2018, may fundamentally sap the feasibility of public sector unions’ ability to exist, let alone provide representation and negotiation services.

\textsuperscript{4} Sekula, Allan, Reading an Archive: Photography between Capital and Labor, Wells, Liz, The Photography Reader, Pg 451. “The archive has to be read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced, or made invisible by the machines of profit and progress.”
When labor does invest in the arts, workers’ skills and talents are transferred into art-objects or performances, rarely finding their way into usable propaganda. This disconnection is the case for the Bread and Roses cultural project sponsored by 1199SEIU in New York City. The project’s chief focus was to produce art for labor organizing, but this goal did not materialize into anything resembling useable propaganda. This is not to say American unions are unaware of their image in the public sphere, or how they are perceived by rank-and-file membership.

Can the union orchestrate a revival of the consumption, deployment, application and interpretation of visual propaganda? The union’s interest of closely collaborating with workers will be found in the production of an aesthetic for direct action. This does not mean that utility should surpass an aesthetically pleasing or inspiring visual culture of labor. On the contrary, I will attempt to demonstrate how a collective photographic social practice can produce a visuality that stimulates the empowerment of workers and changes contemporary labor’s poor visual culture.
Therefore, a meaningful and collectivist visuality of the American labor movement is needed and desired. If undeveloped, the current neoliberal reality of labor and capital will continue to haunt American unions like the specter of Communism once haunted Marx’s Europe.\(^5\) The following chapters explicitly discuss a collaborative intention that restructures labor’s visual culture into a contemporary con

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\(^5\) Marx, Karl, Engles, Frederich, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1847, Communist League, Berlin, Germany
Literature review/Historical context:
Artwork #1: Muniz, Vik, Woman Ironing (Isis), 2008, Digital C Print

(Figure 1)
As a poor Brazilian child Vik Muniz lived amongst the garbage pickers (known as “catadores”) who are fixtures of Brazil’s largest landfill, the Jardim Gramancho, just outside of the artist’s home city of São Paulo. The catadores are often destitute and cannot find work. Instead they create trinkets out of salvageable trash they find and refashion the trash into sellable objects to make their living. The artist conceptualizes his work Woman Ironing (Isis) and his social practice as, a "bystander in the middle of the shootout between structuralist and post-structuralist critique."6 His work delves deeply into critical art theory as a source point for a recreation of Picasso’s 1904 painting of virtually the same name.

While the Picasso piece engenders a classical relationship to portraiture as a gaze that returns suffering back to the subject, Muniz’s piece reformats this gaze into actionable art that impacts the working class. His vision is to export the daily toil of workers, reconfigure their images in the likenesses of modern masterpieces, realized through the physical contents of their livelihoods. By

http://www.artcritical.com/2011/01/08/muniz-walker/
connecting a variety of media to visual metaphor the artist utilizes materials found in the trashcans of common people to highlight economic inequality in what Muniz describes as "[something people] usually try to hide"\(^7\) because it is so unappealing. In the same light the catadores are cast out from mainstream society, where they remain ‘hidden’ from public view. Thus, the colorful spaces between thousands of crushed plastic bottles, long putrid braids of discarded tires, rope, sandals, car parts, bottle caps, and other refuse open up a gamut of contemplation. This inversion of waste materials from consumer goods to trash to art transfers the image of garbage onto an ethereal plane that fetishizes global poverty in a fine art context.

This practice elevates the image of workers into the realm of sellable fine art created by fusing sculptural performance with post-modern assemblage, taking final form as large-scale photographic prints. This is ironic as Muniz was said to have wanted to step away from the fine art world. Yet, taking a conceptual step back, this image absorbs and upends a century-old practice of transforming detritus.

\(^7\) See Scott Lucas’s article Talking trash: Vik Muniz: Garbage Matters, Creative Loafing Charlotte, November 2012.
into art objects of aesthetic and social contemplation. Muniz’s piece is a poetic utterance of humanity as an art object, but the trash turned fine-art sculptures made by such noted artists as Kurt Schwitters, Eva Hess, or Louise Nevelson sharply differ in content and focus. These artists’ contributions lack a recognized quality and impact of the “social practice”⁸ emblazoned in Muniz’s piece.

Muniz’s perspective of wealth and success as a cosmopolitan artist influenced his decision to engage the workers and ensure their direct involvement in the making of this piece. This image in particular, however, dialogizes the worker’s experience into a dialogue of economic “justice” as well as a economic “exploitation.” These terms are relative to the viewer’s judgment of the process that Muniz undertook; the photographs were sold at auction, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars⁹ for the benefit of the catadores. The workers used the money buy new equipment, a new truck, and used their public notoriety to argue for better benefits for their co-op association:

⁸ Socially engaged practice describes art that is collaborative, often participatory and involves people as the medium or material of the work; http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice

the ACAMJ (Association of Recycling Pickers of Jardim Gramacho). Additional benefits garnered for the workers included opportunities to process recyclable materials for the 2014 World Cup as well as government contracts with the city of Duque de Caxias. In short, Muniz’s process demonstrates how a social practice can produce tangible outcomes and change some fundamental social paradigms when collaborators of an artwork maintain an active role in making their own image. On the other hand, this type of social practice reinforces the state of global neoliberal economies and the struggle organized labor faces around the world (the catadores are organized into a workers cooperative).

While the workers established job training programs and social safety nets to honor one another’s service, global capital (which funds the public’s eco-carelessness) improves the lives of workers while stopping them from achieving true social mobility. For its time, Muniz’s practice was a radical departure from established social practice, but looking back, media scholar Hito Steyerl offers up a pithy response to
One example, which is a quite absurd but also common phenomenon, is that radical art is nowadays very often sponsored by the most predatory banks or arms traders and completely embedded in rhetorics of city marketing, branding, and social engineering.  

Moving beyond the politics of representation, the ethics of authorship and ownership in very real terms (in a constructed narrative that oscillates between high post-modernism and low-quality materials) bind Muniz’s distinct artistic styles and approach. This approach made a very real impact on the lives of workers and lifted workers from poverty. The piece challenged workers to take on uncomfortable levels of empowerment that forced a great deal of growth. His work is truly transformative.

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10 Steyrel, Hito, *The Wretched of the Screen*, pg. 98
Part of a larger street-portrait series, Boulevard, is a body of intentional and genuine portraits that empower some of the most
vulnerable residents of American society. Grannan’s portraits don’t merely pose subjects against a blank wall on a city street and offer up his or her humanity in a neatly packaged container. Grannan finds subjects immersed in their homeless narratives and engages them on the “Boulevards” of San Francisco and Los Angeles. The artist pays each person $50 to model for her and asks them how they would like to be portrayed.

This type of social engagement seems to initiate the subject’s performativity. Grannan’s representation takes form on the open street but does so within a closed set of visual conditions. Engaging subjects in this manner implodes an implied anonymity in street portraiture. The subject who is assumed to be a homeless woman (Figure 2) navigates a harsh, urban landscape but does so through a decontextualized backdrop that modifies interpretation of the portrait.11 This visual citation is a playful rendition of Richard Avedon’s signature work *In the American West*. The impromptu engagement between photographer and subject requires a high level of

11 https://fraenkelgallery.com/artists/katy-grannan
interaction, but the visual difference that emerges in Grannan’s approach constitutes a level of visual empowerment afforded to the subject. In short, the “subject” becomes a person.

A person with agency is rarely seen in street photography. Impromptu scenarios are recorded and catalogued away, as the brief engagements between actors simply dissipate. By exploding a subject’s typical gaze into the lens, Grannan leads the viewer to apply any narrative they wish. Anonymous, San Francisco, 2010 leans on the quiet side of Grannan’s portfolio, precisely because the portrait’s power is founded by an arrest of our typical perspective of “undesirable” members of society. As viewers often categorize or reduce people to their most basic visual traits in order to understand them, Grannan asks us to refrain from this type of judgment. We are confronted with the image of a woman (no longer a subject) suspended between categorization and anonymity. The ironic twist to this image is of course its name, nestled among 35 other portraits of

12 “My photographs are vignettes, but they’re not just about the specific person in the picture—the narrative includes the unseen exchange between artist and subject who are often strangers meeting for the first time, each taking a leap of faith by trusting an unfamiliar person and an unexpected encounter.” Katy Grannan in an interview. Lokke, Maria, ON THE BOULEVARD WITH KATY GRANNAN, The New Yorker, April, 2011: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/on-the-boulevard-with-katy-grannan).
virtually the same moniker. There are few variables within the environment, which is what makes the portrait so striking. In particular, this woman who is wearing a black dress, coat, and sandals, looking at her phone is presented to us like any other person that one might encounter on a city street. It is only by reaching the woman’s particular visual details (the dirt, grime and dust-caked fingernails, healing bruises, vibrantly colored lunchbox, and odd expression) that the viewer can confirm the woman’s socioeconomic status.

What is measured here is society’s proclivity to blatantly ignore or jarringly stare at the presence of the proverbial “Other,” rather than engage them as human beings, as Grannan compels us to do. Grannan’s photographic work is propaganda that does not escape the grasp of personal, institutional, or social morality. Her image offers a tangential consideration of morality by viewers, and this is where my appreciation of her work essentially stops. Like many artists, this work tends to engage a population whose lives need
transformation, but those who are engaged by the photographer or by the viewers are in essentially the same place as they began.
Artwork #3: Soth, Alec, Looking for Love, Minnesota, USA, 1996, Silver Gelatin Print

(Figure 3)

*Untitled (Figure 3)* from the 1996 series, *Looking for Love*, by Alec Soth, engages a landscape of strangers and obscure environments in the
artists’ hometown. As an artwork, Untitled, visualizes a harsh view of life in the industrial Midwest. The viewer is met by a wide-angle view of a factory-born town. Taken from high above, the photograph captures an array of light and splits the image into meaningful visual devices. Where natural light is present, the artist inverts its typical usage. Usually, natural landscapes are embellished by sunlight to offset harsh urban environments or distracting objects. Instead, we are directed through a harsh contrast into the urban backdrop that is lit like a 19th century Naturalist painting. Soth’s visual phrasing delivers “a curious and intuitive approach to people and their stories,” but in the case of this photographic plate he attempts to lyricize a town’s entire narrative.

There is little doubt that Soth portrays citizens who are caught up in disruptive political economy. Spatial layers of this photograph hint to these conceptual sections: a railroad line cuts diagonally across the center of the frame, while a billowing smokestack and telephone poles create diverging horizons. These layers form a stark narrative: if you do not become a part of the manufacturing wage-labor whole you will be estranged from this community. This idea is suggested by the scale of two people walking at the bottom of the frame, read as powerless figures in this urban ecosystem. At first glance the figures are easy to miss, and I suspect this is Soth’s point of being alienated from an environment focused on industrial production.

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13 In the Minneapolis area who are accustomed to solid social relationships and a friendly atmosphere, despite the actuality of lived experience.

Soth arguably borrows this type of layered aesthetic of comparing socioeconomic and natural systems from Hilda and Bernd Becher’s photograph “Bethlehem, PA (1986), USA.” (Figure 4). The Becher image utilizes front light as a narrative device that maps the relationship between human and industry as a life cycle. This image, however, coalesces through industry, and remains a key part of the community’s narrative until death. Soth’s image changes this dynamic through a distinct inversion of backlight, perspective and ordering of the social and natural life cycles. In short, we are led to believe these figures and town are actual products of social and industrial production subjected to a host of power relations beyond their control. (Figure 4)
I visited this image throughout the past year as it efficiently demonstrates an allusion to a political economy I find difficult to capture. Its impact lingered in my conversations with service workers who are at equal footing with a previous generation’s subsistence on a manufacturing economy. Connecting workers of a service industry with the experiences of a forgotten but no less important workforce (e.g. contingent academic laborers) was an enlightening thought experiment I continued to use throughout my portrait process. Although contingent academics might not be subject to the same industrial health hazards, their challenges of sleep deprivation, lack of health benefits and being completely overworked is no laughing matter and akin to the message this image represents.

Any environment that has a variety of focal points and varied lighting used to narrate a system is conceptually challenging, not to mention a technical nightmare. Thus, the filmic nature Soth produces with a large format film-based camera challenges my overall choice of format, process and attention to light. What materials best visually situate and elevate the richness of a narrative when photographing workers in their environments? I can assume these figures are workers either finding their way home after a long day of difficult labor, or, attempting to cleave their way into an alternative existence at dawn. While Soth does follow a photographic tradition in the likeness of Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander,¹⁵ his subjects and environments are typically random and more lyrical than documentary.

Artwork

#4: Sander, August, Washerwoman, Germany, 1930, Silver Gelatin Print

(Figure 5)
August Sander is quite possibly the most direct influence on my artistic and contrarian approach to portraiture. His oeuvre, *People of the 20th Century*, heavily influenced my process of selecting portrait subjects, engaging with them, conceptualizing our interaction and framing them within their environments. The photographs in his repertoire are essentially positivist typologies of the German republic captured from the 1920s until the mid-1960s. In this articulation, Sander’s ‘types’ form a photographic language that attempts to condense an entire society into a communicative tool.

*Washerwoman* (figure 5) is one of the last parts of his mammoth project that focuses on “types in the city.” This portrait is one of the most characteristic depictions of his society’s (the then Weimar Republic) marginalized underclass. The subject is found in the midst of her narrative of taxing labor, which takes place in the middle of a public square. Her general complexion is filled with dirt and a heavy film of sweat surrounds her head. The water penetrating the lower cusp of her work garment points to the difficulty, stress, and menial quality of life that a washer position affords.
Affectively speaking, Sander’s use of portraiture was encouraged by documentary projects, which insisted on political and social reform. Sander’s framing of the subject’s tools produces a sculpture-like quality. In this image, such qualities are conveyed through mounds of clothing (resting atop a water spigot) and the mashed face of the washerwoman. At the time this portrait was made, hyperinflation, high unemployment, and a weak oligarchy plagued Germany’s underclass and limited access to social welfare. The Washerwoman was likely forced into this position by a lack of available employment. The totality of Sander’s grand allusions to social and political conditions additionally influenced my interest in German portrait photography and while his portraits fulfill a particular type of social representation, there is a splinter of truth (however constructed) about the conditions of the washerwoman and the underclass.

However, where Sander believes that the camera is a piece of equipment that must record the true objective nature of social reality, I

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16 Emil Nolde, Otto Dix, of the Weimar Republic used their artistic talents to represent war as putrid and horrid affairs urging their state to avoid war. In his own light, Sander sought to grow social welfare programs and aid laborers, similar to Lewis Hine’s use of the camera as an educational and political tool. See
couldn’t be farther away from this approach. The subjects are afforded very little, if any, agency. The subjects are one-dimensional and their narratives remain hidden to the viewers. Upon looking at this image we only know what is observable, or what is portrayed as a historical account of this “type” of woman during this period. By engaging subjects and asking them to co-develop an image of agency, the positivist notion of documentary photography is no longer desirable or applicable to the goals of this project. However, Sander’s ability to capture the slightest of details, his ability to use light as a communicative medium, is something I still aspire to convey in collaborative portraits. Such small details can make a major impact on what images can convey?
Project Overview

My project is designed to be a small gallery exhibition of 8-10 images and a digital archive that outlines the production of constructed portraits. The digital interface of the archive was created through Klynt, a web-based multimedia tool specializing in online documentary production. In essence, I hoped to demonstrate how fine art photography could be made into a visual conduit to deal with socially and politically relevant issues, and ultimately applied to union-focused propaganda. These issues are core to the elucidation of workers’ narratives. In addition, the digital archive invites users to become immersed in our collaborative process and photographic social practice. The most heavily discussed topics revealed during interview sessions were turned into keywords. These keywords were made into clickable pathways in the Klynt system. The digital archive is published online at http://gdp21.org and made available for other activists to co-opt and utilize for propaganda purposes.

A user starts on the “Category Keyword” page (Figure 6), and is able to click on twelve keywords, which direct the user a “People
Category” page (Figure 7). If a user decides to click on a person’s thumbnail on the “People Category” page, they are directed to a person’s specific splash page. Each splash page (Figure 8) has its own unique keywords attached in the upper right hand corner.

These additional keywords can be clicked to transport the user to specific video or audio clip(s) about that subject. The narrative the user follows entirely depends on the conversation that portrait sessions yielded, but ultimately, workers relate their experiences to produce activist-inspired media. During or after the end of each video clip, users retain the option of exiting or further exploring the person’s media by selecting the back button, clicking another keyword, or jumping back to the Category Keyword page by pressing the back button.
(Figure 6, Detail of Category Keyword Page, user interface of the archive)
(Figure 7, Screen capture of the archive’s “People Category” page)
Figure 8, Screen capture from a participant’s “Splash” page.

Figure 9, Overview of the portrait archive’s technical construction.
The technical construction of the archive is modeled as a word-based taxonomy, spread out web-like across corresponding topics on the Keyword menu. The technical construction of this project (Figure 9) experienced several visual iterations, but what ultimately served the content was a non-hierarchical polygon. In truth, the object looks like an average corporate flow chart, but on-screen the user is provided with topic choices and can direct and redirect workers’ narratives by choice. Not one word, or subject was promoted above
any other. In fact, the relationships sought after in this project were focused on culling connections between workers within a transitional industry and the keywords that surfaced during their interview.

The Portrait Library (Figure 10) was constructed to house more tangential observations about workers and their experiences, but it does not exclusively represent the keyword menu or my established photographic social practice. The intent to include a portrait library was to cover unfilled gaps left open by workers’ interviews. Photographs within the portrait library feature people at work, or provide symbolic allusions toward keywords.

Conceptually, the project was designed to explore distinct avenues of collaborative authorship and collective ownership within portrait imagery. The application of authorship was not controlled by the visual expression of portrait subjects nor was I in total control. The heavy involvement of the workers produced the ability to concretely co-construct “collaborative portraits.” This process limited conjecture about the perspective of the subject or ethics of the artist as a
documenter. Workers were often looking through the lens of the camera, directing their narrative(s), pose, posture, selecting locations, and/or debating the merits of their reconstructed image. The images of these workers and this project would be difficult to accuse of cultural barbarism by the very nature of each image construction.

From the inception of my project, it was clear a photographic social practice could generate media driven by higher interests than organizational or commercial goals. These “higher interests” materialized into the content of the digital archive. My aim, however, was to co-engineer a variety of narratives by expanding the limits of activist media as a collectivist visual practice for the labor movement.

For the past two years, I forged relationships with the “forgotten workers” of the service industries in the San Francisco Bay Area and booming economy of manufacturing towns in Tennessee. While my equipment and footage of manufacturing workers was stolen, a handful of transcribed interviews, audio recordings and photographs remained. Each worker I collaborated

17 Regarded as a white populist-narrative in current national politics, the ‘forgotten worker’ also exists in urban, diverse, cosmopolitan areas.
with was afforded time and space to create a portrait as they wished to be seen through an occupational lens. The subject was then asked a set of interview questions that encouraged them to visualize their narrative as a piece of useable propaganda. But these questions were prompted by my initial interest in asking workers to symbolically and visually define a portrait of a “contemporary American worker.” In turn, the subjects described their expression, gaze, environment, time of day, and their “working narratives.” After each interview was conducted, the collaborators were strongly encouraged to hand-draw their portrait; as seen below in figure 11.
(Figure 11, initial Sketch by UC Student Workers Union member Daniel Rudin)

I took the initial drawings and made digital sketches to align our aesthetics and approaches to image making. After sketches were exchanged and a time and place were set for each collaborative portrait, the resulting images were sent to participants for reflection, review and confirmation of what we produced. I surmised I would need to release my creative authority and encourage collaborators to do the same, if we were ever to arrive at a portrait of value—something to challenged the status quo of labor’s poor visual culture. This technique of releasing creative authority was inspired by French philosopher Jacques Rancière and his theory of dissensus.

Rancière describes dissensus as a cohabitated but disjointed set of visions, bound by modes of subjective experience. These modes of expression “do [es] not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, [it] re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience” ....[but] the new modes of construction [provide for] common objects and new possibilities of
subjective enunciation.”18 Thus, by releasing our creative authority to one another’s subjective vision and by redefining our aim, we reform “the sensible” as a collaborative process. One of the first workers in the Bay Area that participated in this process was Theresa Hice, a mother and PhD student at UC Santa Cruz. Theresa is one of few African Americans at UCSC and a prominent member of the UC Student Workers Union. We engaged in an in-person interview, but she also sent thorough descriptions of her portrait without any visual aids. The reader can follow the progression of Theresa’s portrait, from inception to creation to application of fine art as propaganda in figures 12-17.

18 Ranciere, Jacques, On Politics and Aesthetics, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, Pg. 14
Ideation, creation and application (Figures 12-17):

Theresa Hice <theresamario28@gmail.com> 11/7/17

to me

Fan,

I liked the idea of manipulating the light to make the setting more dramatic, sullen etc.
I have 2 ideas:
1. Me sitting on the floor of my living room with stacks of papers, my open laptop, and a stack of books surrounding me while my daughter plays off to the side of me OR She is incorporating the stacks of paperwork into her playing (like using her dolls to balance on top of the stack of paperwork)
2. I am sitting at the dinner table with a plate of food balancing on a stack of paperwork trying to eat while holding a paper up to my face which is cutting off my view of my daughter who is sitting on the opposite side of the table looking at me. I envision the photo to be taken from the side behind Aurora, so that you see the back of her head and part of my face obstructed by the paper I am holding up.

As for text on the poster I was thinking something along the lines of:
UC Student Workers Union. We work for you so you can spend time with them.

OR

UC Student Workers Union.
Higher wages at work. More time at home.
Tell us what you want to fight for.

Let me know what you think.

(Figure 12)
I thought of these because that's how I feel when I have a lot of work. I try to keep it separate from home but sometimes it intrudes on my daytime and meals. The visual is pretty good, I just want it cleaner. I think it should be focused on the subject(s) and the surrounding detail. I think the message of the visual you sent is a little muddled without the text below it and I want the image to be able to stand alone.

Let me know your thoughts.

In solidarity,

Theresa Hico Johnson

(Figure 14)
Collaborative portrait:

(Figure 15)
(Figure 16) Theresa, Collaborative Portrait applied to UC Student Workers Bargaining Rally, UC Santa Cruz, 2018. Member Generated slogans.
And here are the resulting portraits as utilized in a recent UC Student Workers Union bargaining rally (April 30th, 2018):
The portraits took form as useable propaganda during a bargaining rally for the UC Student Workers Union over a range of contractual issues (pay, workload, benefits, and respect). Union members who were previously photographed were contacted in advance of the bargaining rally and asked to design useable propaganda. If they felt unable to do so, their interview transcripts were mined and the propaganda was sent to their email for confirmation or edits.
**Collaborative Authorship, Collective Ownership**

As noted in the previous section, collaborative authorship and collective ownership were two undefined terms that found their way into my vernacular towards the end of my project. However, the terms collaborative authorship and collective ownership signify a rejection of image ownership. Further elaborated, this relational interaction between collaborators exists for the “photographer” and the “subject” engaged in a process which blurs the designated roles of “author” and “spectator” and “creator” or viewer.”
During our process, the collaborators ensured space was provided for our roles to shift so we could understand, adapt and engage each other’s visuality. In between interview questions, some collaborators would check the camera’s viewfinders, took turns at practical matters of composing the portrait as well as relating the impact of light and focus. It would be a fool’s errand if we did not afford space to comprehend and process memories, skills, talents, and experiences derived from the socioeconomic worlds from which the collaborators emerged. In his essay *Reading the Archive: Between Labor and Capital*, artist and scholar Alan Sekula frames the paradigm of implicit socialization of the photographer’s perspective:

“[T]he problematic character of this descriptive power [of photographic representation] is itself compelling, compounded by the fact that the life-world that beckons is one in which the photographer is already a social actor, never a completely innocent or objective bystander.”¹⁹

While we are always “social actors,” the characteristics Sekula proposes (that photographers are neither innocent nor objective) are neutralized if the portrait is collaborative and not modeled on a

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subject-object dynamic. Rather, the question to be posed to Sekula, is:
what happens to photographers when neither the “photographer” nor
the “subject” claim nor desire ownership of the image? What
“belongs” to us in our image? What is wholly espoused from our
perspective is neither measurable nor crucial to making a portrait a
piece of “property.” This is true because the image is not destined to
return back to a “creator.” Sekula’s terms (property, ownership,
creator, photographer, subject) and roles are so mutable in this
process of portrait making that the distinction of ownership seems to
have lost value by losing strict categorizations.

Perhaps, it is the experience of collaborative creation, which
builds a critical bridge between projection, self-narrativization and
cultural production. This logic would follow seeming how the end goal
of the image is a community benefit. This same approach applies to
the notion of collective authorship. Authorship, as Barthes notes in The
Death of the Author, is “more or less [a] transparent allegory of
fiction” and this sense, “fiction” is constructed, documented and
rejoined into threads of recovery of the union’s collective image.
Cultural critic, Ariella Azoulay, argues that such photographic collaborations are processes of constant negotiation. \(^{20}\) The collaborators are emancipated through a connection that is never simply codified by context. Each actor participates in building the image, and likely does not wed him or herself to a limited range of representation or embodied roles. The door for a practice of collectivist visuality opens when the benefit of the interaction serves a common welfare claimed by no one, but potentially used by all:

“...[one’s] presence cannot be subsumed under the reign of a higher authority.... [T]he limits of their interpretation [photographer and ‘author’] are not determined in advance and are always open to negotiation...[T]hey [photographer and subject] are not restricted to the intentions of those who would claim to be their authors or of those who participate in their production... \(^{21}\)

Azoulay’s theory of visual negotiation can be applied to swaths of union members and non-union workers alike. By utilizing this theory in the collectivist approach to representation, collaborators can recover a direct visual action\(^{22}\) through constructed photographic

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\(^{21}\) ibid, pg.136

\(^{22}\) https://www.iww.org/cs/history/icons/sabotage
means. What is unclear is if workers take up this call to visual arms will they actually release the notion of independent ownership of their image(s)? It is something of a different nature to agree to be photographed and sign a release, than to release your image into a collectively owned ecosystem. I view this position similarly to the use of materials within the Public Domain. This idea of “ownership” within a public sphere does extend almost exclusively to entities that preserve materials for free public use, while not claiming ‘exclusive ownership’ for organizational gain. This same argument applies where one can use and repurpose images to revive the contemporary American labor movement’s visuality.²⁴

²⁴ IWW History: https://www.iww.org/cs/history/icons/sabotage
What happened to the Union Vision(s)?

Contemporary union media is slickly fashioned, branded by a team of in-house staff members or paid outside consultants (who are compensated by union dues) to deliver a series of visuals intended to motivate workers into action. The AFL-CIO, SEIU, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, UFCW, and AFSCME haven’t commissioned an artist since the late 1990s for propaganda purposes. Despite the success of 1199 SEIU’s Bread and Roses Cultural Project,
Arts & Democracy, and a spate of other programs\textsuperscript{26} that seek to unify organizing and activism, not much movement occurred.

In the time since, no consolidated effort within a single union or coalition to \textit{infuse} fine arts with union organizing to produce propaganda appeared. There were exceptions, of course, like a rise in campaign arts that emerged from Maryland Institute of Contemporary Art\textsuperscript{27} Adjuncts campaign with SEIU Local 500,\textsuperscript{28} or the \textit{Fight for $15} campaign (propping up locals which haven’t organized in decades) but the cultural production of the union remains of poor quality. On the Union’s end, the simplification and standardization of ‘branding’ is widely stressed by their advertising consultants—\textsuperscript{29} a well the union draws from frequently. \textit{Branded} organizing provides a ‘vision’ traceable back to advertising boardrooms and executive suites that transformed the cultural production of the union into a commodified service, or skillfully branded product. (Figures 17-21)

\textsuperscript{26} Program overview of ‘Arts and Democracy’: \url{http://artsanddemocracy.org/detail-page/?program=workshops&capID=201};
\textsuperscript{27} MICA Adjunct Campaign Art: \url{http://micaadjuncts.org/post/82386632742/vote-union-yes}
\textsuperscript{28}MICA Adjunct Campaign Art (2) \url{http://www.mcdanieladjunctfacultyunion.org/contract-highlights.html}
\textsuperscript{29}Even if the demographics of represented workers change, the visual identity of the labor movement remains virtually unchanged for a number of decades. See: the American Association of Advertising \url{http://www.ana.net/content/show/id/role-of-advertising-in-america}
Unions under a post-World War II visuality work their membership over to utilize prefabricated media through excruciating slogans. For example, on a local level, members of the union, or supporters of a union organizing campaign are asked to fill in the blanks on placards that often read: “#ichoosemyunion…“, “To me my union means __________,” or “A University for all is __________.” The following figures are examples of real-world marketing materials from organizing or membership campaigns:

(Figure 18)
SBAC LEADERS SAY
"I CHOOSE MY UNION"

(Figure 19)

#iChooseMyUnion

“I choose my union because it gives me and my coworkers an opportunity to negotiate a healthy and safe workplace.”

– Vanessa Seastrong
DLC 704, BU 17

SEIU Local 1000

(Figure 20)
Figures 18-21 do not motivate workers into action, innovate imagery of the union, nor does it provide an alternative narrative to shape the future of the working class. Unions must do more than form a visual narrative that harangues corporations, gets cozy with management, or relies on sentimentality of workers’ lives to produce compelling narratives. If a foundation of the labor movement’s visuality is challenged then gazes of labor and capital must also be addressed.\(^{30}\) Considering how unions foresaw a multi-transitional

\(^{30}\) See Allan Sekula’s article *Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labor and Capital*, which denotes this issue at hand in the realm of the physical, photographic archive: “Consider this example: some of the photographs in this book were originally reproduced in the annual reports of the Dominion Steel and Coal Company, others were carried in miners’ wallets or framed on the mantelpieces of working-class homes. Imagine two different gazes. Imagine the gaze of a stockholder (who may or may not have ever visited a coal mine) thumbing his way to the table of earnings and lingering for a moment on the picture of a mining machine,
nature of global economics, they did a great deal of violence to their domestic aesthetic sensibility.

By critically examining the union’s marketing materials (figures 17-20) it is evident how images of workers mirror the same neoliberal visual trends being fought against. Figure 22 (a Bank of American online advertisement) reveals a shared visuality with corporate messaging. The same non-serif fonts, positioning of smiling faces, and bold wording is used for ‘effective’ communication. The attention paid to an individual’s needs, wants, and desires are so closely linked to the cultural production of the individual, we lose the sense of the collective. Words are not enough. While some of the images in figures 17-20 highlight individual stories of members, these advertisements are not an anomaly.

presumably the concrete source of the abstract wealth being accounted for in those pages. Imagine the gaze of a miner, or of a miner’s spouse, child, parent, sibling, lover, or friend drifting to a portrait during breaks or odd moments during the working day.” (Wells, Page 445; The Photography Reader)
From a historical perspective, visual practices within the union and the public’s perception of the labor movement changed from a specter to a proper bargaining tool—the capitalist narrative realized within the union. The political and social clout developed by unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) during the 1910s to the late
1930s was created on an organizing model of trade unionism and the “general strike.” This philosophy entailed entire community shutdowns, work stoppages and wildcat strikes,\textsuperscript{32} which paralyzed businesses and communities in order to reach political and organizational goals. The visual image of a cat roused to action (Figure 23) encapsulated the fervor and fury of a union ready to pounce on an employer at any given moment. This is precisely due to the organizing philosophy espoused by the CIO and the IWW that did not stop at the picket line or at the entrance to corporate offices.

\textsuperscript{32} Short strikes during the workday to oppose harsh working conditions, injuries to workers, or other workplace grievances.
A major precedent in industrial relations occurred just after the end of the Second World War, greatly impacting labor’s visual culture and its collectivist organizing models prevalent during a more radical era (1910-1930). This change to labor policy was agreed upon by several international unions during a wave of aggressive general
Decisions to reformat the union’s visuality and organizing philosophy were made in top-heavy fashion by labor leaders of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, effectively reducing the entire structure of the
American labor movement into a ‘proper’ negotiation tool. There is little, if any doubt that a great number of gains were made for the socioeconomic security of American workers, but it came at the cost of impactful social organization, the expense of the union’s visuality and (in my opinion) organizational vitality. This policy change manifested in labor’s visual culture (see figure 23), which became increasingly corporatized, focused on controlling relations between management and unions. Granted, this poster is an “all-in” effort to produce military weapons for the US Army, but it no less demonstrates the differences of visuality and cooperation of IWW and the AFL. This change to industrial relations also sought to alienate workers from management to a relegated group, rather than a syndicalist based cooperative industry that affords the means of production to the workers.

Through a negotiation between collaborators, the roles of image production and tenets of ownership were suspended, opening up an array of photographic possibilities. By developing and
producing images as a collectivist practice, labor’s existing visual
culture can meet a potential to beat back the rise of corporate and
neoliberal aesthetics plaguing popular media and labor’s visual
culture. This collectivist image process can be a concrete application
for material and aesthetic gains for today’s unions if the members can
convince the union to tolerate the idea of releasing authority and
engaging their members to remake their union.

Many of these practices are utilized in organizing and
membership campaigns, but the union’s directives almost always drive
the mentality and the members themselves rarely produce the
visuality. In my limited experience as a union organizer, at a local
which claimed a great deal of independence, strings tied to the
International body of our union or messages devised by local union
bosses were rarely devised as a collectivist practice. This is not to say
that unions aren’t different from one another, or that they don’t
engage with members (who are the bread and butter) that make up
their constituencies, but there is a divide that separates staff and
members who run day-to-day operations. If this gap was thoroughly
bridged and explored by the organization what could be produced?

What kind of labor movement would exist?
Conclusion

Throughout the development of this project a collectivist approach of presentation suspended the idea of exclusive ownership and authorship, provided a space to frequently change roles of subject, photographer and creator and emphasized agency to collaborators. These conditions were meant to open up the portrait and propaganda making process by expanding the limits and barriers of media production. The collaborators utilized different approaches to self-presentation, narrativization and of their labor.

This sense of presentation to a collective may always be influenced by concerns of ownership, use, or application in a capitalist narrative. This collaborative portrait practice offered workers a reprieve from this narrative as well as the ability to construct a reality that took tangible form. But, if narratives are mutable artifices, which can transform perspectives, how was this project viewed from outside of the art-labor community created for this project?
During the DANM MFA exhibit, it was clear that elements of collaborative authorship and collective ownership were not properly communicated to gallery visitors. Nor did viewers ascertain the complexity of the collaborative portrait process. In my exhibition space, two large still portraits (35 ½” x 55”) were framed and mounted on a wall next to a 60” monitor (figure 24). The monitor ran a 6-minute loop of video portraits intended to illustrate the difference between the collaborative portrait process and a more traditional approach to social documentation. This approach attempted to demonstrate an “objective” perspective with little intervention.

(Figure 25)
In our contemporary era, there is an implicit understanding how a social practice can shatter the hidden interiority of the subject’s gaze into a constellation of perspectives (e.g. viewers, participants, process, the archive, gaze. The juxtaposition between still and video did not contradict one another, but instead challenged the limits of viewing photographs and video in the same space. It was clear (to me at least) that viewers became perplexed when they oscillated their view between the video piece and the still images. They were trying to understand why still and moving images were interacting within their field of vision. Several viewers remained transfixed on the screen, waiting to see movement, closely examining the monitor to wait and see a chest rise, an adjustment of an arm, leg, or waist.

The number of images, as well as the limited content, constricted the overall narrative to its barebones. Fusing abstract art theory and practical propaganda together did not occur in this exhibition either altogether, and so again, the presence of the digital archive would’ve made a major difference to the user experience and level of understanding. I suppose this confusion also demonstrates an
interest towards understanding a different approach to portrait photography that is seldom explored. The archive, however, was not present. This placed the exhibit into a level of abstraction and confusion for viewers that were not inclined, knowledgeable or interested in image deconstruction. Three viewers, however, did approach me with questions, compliments and their interpretations. They offered comments such as:

“"We saw the video and the pictures. We liked them and thought you displayed ‘who they [portrait subjects] think they are’ in the video, and ‘who they want to be in the pictures.’"”\(^{37}\) Another onlooker was utterly confused about the entirety of the project and was glad that “there was someone here to explain what it all meant….if you weren’t then I would’ve liked the pictures, but would not understand what was being said.”

Other onlookers sat down and watched the entire video-loop and took more time to contemplate the printed portraits. I do think this

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\(^{37}\) Lindsay Moffat’s (a fellow in the MFA program) mother and sister approached me to ask if my influences were connected to August Sander, which they recently engaged with at an exhibition of French photographers while on holiday in Paris, a few weeks prior.
engagement was a success if gallery visitors deployed critical thinking and aesthetic contemplation about labor. However, I do not think that without engaging with those viewers, the images alone could’ve provoked the intended discourse.

The task of organizing so many large prints at once, while juggling the archive’s construction and buggy programming, made the presentation and integration of the project a unmanageable. When the time to show came around, there were additional technical issues I did not foresee: the size of the 80” monitor I was set on using dominated the small gallery space afforded to me.

What I wanted to show and what I was able to show on digital and physical ends were compromised. If I faced less technical, political and social challenges, avenues of communication would’ve emerged through an exchange between the gallery visitors and the work on the walls. While the majority of constructed portraits may be housed and utilized in a digital space to maximize the ‘effectiveness’ of a stylized, organically devised, collaborative art piece, it is unclear how much of a difference an expansion of the number of constructed
portraits would have made to viewers. If there was, however, a display of propaganda materials, which would include text and logos juxtaposed to the images a very different show could’ve transpired. Then again, text and logos may have radically altered the intended interpretation of images. Outside of the gallery context, the experience of utilizing fine art imagery for propaganda means was inspiring, thrilling and an interesting experience. Workers were appreciative and far more receptive to images, which helped to influence the visuality of the workers’ movement at UC Santa Cruz.

I envision the next iteration of the thesis project to take form in a professional media setting. I hope to further consolidate the portrait making process for time concerns applicable to long-term campaign timelines. While a solid foundation was created for the benefit of others, I foresee the application of this photographic social practice as a challenging feat within an organizational context. Many of the old structures of the union are based on a hierarchical democratic politick that might not better serve the union, as well as the community of workers being represented. When these photographic and social
practices are applied to organizational frameworks outside of academe, I will be poised to grow as an artist and activist, and member of a community applying grounded visual research.

New modes of expression are a foundation for redefining the visuality of labor. I hope these expressions indicate unions as a cultural treasure and necessity. What I do envision in the labor movement is a system-wide collaborative effort of the redistribution of image making, by mutual agreement between members of the union and staff who run day-to-day operations. Design by committee is quite different and often yields strange, inconsistent results by smashing a variety of competing designs and varying ideas together. It is unclear if the future of the union’s visuality and approaches to worker-engagement will be a syndicalist effort.

However, the next steps I undertake with organized labor will involve a focused digital production of the collaborative practice developed at DANM. While no banner, sprawling online ad, or single image can constitute “the spirit” of a movement, a deliberate aesthetic can supply much needed energy for an inward gaze (for workers and
their unions) that is long overdue. If members and the union continue to be framed (or frame themselves) as a service dedicated to solving individual problems at individual levels, then, what actually changes for the collective effort? If the union can attempt to reimagine collaboration as *visuality* of the labor movement, then it is possible to engineer a different experience of work and labor in the future.
Gross Domestic People of the 21st Century Questionnaire, Industry: Public Education

What is your name?

Where are you from? ✓

How old are you?

When did you start working as a ? ✓

How do you envision a portrait of yourself as a contemporary American worker? (No limit to the fantasy or representation. You may present yourself in any respect as long as it references your working identity/ies.)

What is the light like in your portrait?

Are there other people or objects with you? If so, what are they?

What time of day is it in your portrait?

What is the environment of your portrait?

What would you like to discuss in your portrait as a worker?

Are there labor themes or social codes you would like to discuss within the visual narrative of your portrait?

Do you belong to a union or labor organization? Why or why not? ✓ (Please elaborate)

What role do unions play in your life?

What do you know about unions?

Why aren’t people joining unions now?

How can the union visually engage with workers to help them join?

How do you visualize unions?

What visually comes to your mind when you think of unions?

What kind of visuality do you think applies to labor in our contemporary context?

What are the images you think would apply to that? Why? How? What does it look like? In what ways do you think the labor movement could improve in order to be a more attractive and effective organization?

(Figure 26)
How do you think unions can do this visually?

Why do you think that would work or fail?

What are your values at work? What is the framework of your working identity? How does that align with your values?

What is your current wage? (If you aren’t currently employed are you volunteering, or in training? If so, please indicate how much money it takes to support your volunteer or training activities and who is paying.)

What do you think about your socioeconomic status in the larger economy?

If you take on different identities at work and at home—what are the identities you take on? Please describe them in detail.

A term I think of is a multiple identity. How do your identities manifest in the workplace?

How do projections of yourself at work differ from other people’s visual perceptions of you at work?

Please describe the successes and drawbacks (in your opinion) at an average day at your workplace:

How do you cope with stressors (financial, economic, political, or social) associated with your position?

Is there a specific role you seek to play in your working identity? What does that role look like? (E.g., an action, a service, a symbol, an insignia)

Do you have more than one job? (If, so please indicate it in your answer)

How did you get involved working in the _____ industry? (As much information as you would like to provide)

Are you part of a traditional or non-traditional industry? (Please describe your industry relative to the “traditional” or “non-traditional” answer you provide).

Has your industry changed? If so, how? Why do you believe it to be the case?

What impact did that change have on how you visualize yourself?

What impact did the change have in your community?

How would you describe industries that are in socioeconomic transition relative to your position as a worker? (Ex: the restaurant, hotel, manufacturing industry)

How has your industry changed? In what ways? Please provide examples that illustrate the change for you.

Can you tell us what you think about being a new and contemporary worker in your society and field?

(Figure 27)
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