

Thoughts on the Residency at McDonald's, Studio Practice, and Public Space
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The following essay was written during the Residency at McDonald's, from July 25th - August 1st, 2014. For more information on the residency, please visit: www.residencyatmcdonalds.biz

In 2012, I did a project called *One Day Painting*. At the time I was working for an artist in the Upper West Side, and I myself was working without a studio, although I had access to a woodshop in Bushwick. I was becoming interested in painting again, but did not have the space to pursue painting on a large scale. My boss went out of town for a week, so I planned to make a painting in his studio while he was away. I built the stretcher (53" x 53") in Bushwick and took it on the subway up to the studio, where I stretched and gessoed the canvas and let it dry. A day or two later I came back and made an abstract painting within the confines of one day, then built a shadowbox for it and took it home. I still have the painting, although I don't think it is a particularly good painting on its own – what was more important about it was the experience of doing it, and I ended up writing a small book piece about that. *One Day Painting* utilized external time constraints to push my practice outside of its established box, in terms of both media and ideas (in this case painting and abstraction).

In the last two years my relationship to space has changed. I now have my own studio, and am working on a series of large-scale paintings. Ironically, the situation has switched – before, there was no space to make large-scale work; now, there is no time to make anything but the large paintings. The main body of my work is detail-oriented, and working around the constraints of a full-time day job means working for about a year on one painting. Book projects, and experimental exercises in general, are areas I'm interested in that I don't feel I have the time currently to explore in my studio practice, because any studio time I have has to go towards finishing the painting series. The studio has become an environment geared towards the production of a single, planned body of work, and very little else. In effect I've become an employee of my own studio. *One Week Book* is a break from that.

The tension in my studio practice is about space - in New York, space is expensive, so I need to sacrifice time in order to purchase the space necessary to make larger work. A New York resident has a direct relationship to space: you pay x dollars/month in exchange for x amount of space to hold x amount of possessions, all of which is relative to your net worth as an individual. If you can afford more rent, you can have a bigger living space, and if you cannot, you move to a smaller living space, or a different neighborhood. Space functions differently for the corporation than for the individual. A McDonald's location is not governed by the same relationship of amount of space and location to individual body – locations have to exist in high and low income areas simultaneously, because both will provide revenue. A large space has to exist 24/7, even if it is only filled close to capacity during lunchtime hours. What this results in is a large amount of unused, but necessary, seating and space. The same rent is paid for this space every month, whether your body is in the seat or not. Empty space is a luxury to a private citizen, and New Yorkers pay out the nose for it. For McDonald's, empty space simply means less potential for revenue. The chance that you'll buy a second soda or order of fries if you stay 8 hours instead of 8 minutes is worth it to the corporation, given enough free table space, because the space needs to exist either way. As long as it doesn't take away from the ability for

another customer to also exist there, there's no reason to kick someone out for working on their computer, making drawings, or sleeping.

This conflict between technical rules and symbiotic use of space manifests itself physically throughout the McDonald's restaurant. There is free, fast wifi (faster than in my studio!), but there are no outlets to plug a computer charger into (this resulted in satellite hour-long Starbucks residencies to charge electronics). There is a sign detailing the 30-minute time limit on loitering in McDonald's, right next to a comfortable, curved booth that was prime real estate for sleeping at night and chatting during the day. It is the same idea that governs jaywalking in New York: legally you can't do it, but realistically the rule is almost never enforced.

In recent years, McDonald's has undergone a process of rebranding, exemplified by moves like the launch of a line of coffee products known as McCafé. This change has also asserted itself physically in the design of McDonald's, and based on your choice of location you can see the old style McDonald's,

or the McCafé'd versions (there are actual stores called McCafés which are primarily coffee shops, but for the sake of this essay I will use the term McCafé to refer to newer, friendlier McDonald's locations in New York). The older McDonald's had brighter fluorescent lighting, and often the furniture was bolted down. Chairs that were made of hard plastic in old McDonald's have cushions in a McCafé. McCafés have dimmer, warmer lighting and earth tone color schemes; the chairs at our McDonald's were all moveable, allowing for modular seating which promoted group discussions. Instead of being confined to a maximum of four people in a conversation, we could alter the space to include as many people as we desired (there were also many circular tables that helped make this possible). McCafé's are consciously more inviting than McDonald's used to be, and this is probably McDonald's' attempt to compete with Starbucks. In a McCafé, it is possible to blend in.

I think from an older liberal perspective we look at McDonald's, and other fast food companies, as immoral organizations. There is a strain of New York liberalism that wants to tear down McDonald's, Starbucks, and other large organizations that threaten smaller independently-owned stores, especially McDonald's because it is also very unhealthy. The way they profit off of our country's largest addiction seems predatory. But is it the chicken or egg? Do the fast food companies create the demand for greasy foods, or do they simply fill a role that the pre-existing demand forces to exist? Certainly these companies use marketing schemes aimed at specific groups (like children) to increase sales, which I find troubling. But at the same time, I think the demand for the type of food McDonald's serves would exist with or without McDonald's, because greasy food is simply too tempting. To some extent it sells itself, and I'm not sure how



The "30 Minute Time Limit" Sign

much the marketing sells burgers as a whole, as opposed to just convincing people to get a McDonald's burger instead of a Burger King burger. I went into this project thinking I was subverting the intentions of the McDonald's organization. But when I look back at my relationship to fast food, from the standpoint of a healthy adult, it's been a largely positive experience.

On a personal level, this goes back to middle school and high school (when I started skateboarding), in the early days of my social independence, but with the caveat of societal restriction. What I mean by this is that from around 7th grade, I was allowed to go to school and come home without a guardian, which meant that I, along with my friends, was in charge of my own schedule. Suddenly, a world of hanging out outside of school and without the presence of adults became available – unstructured socializing. But where is this supposed to take place, especially in the winter? If there's no one's house to go to, food establishments become some of the only places that are open late and offer seating.

For semi-broke teenagers, fast food is an easy option, and also the only one where there is no institutionalized pressure to leave within a reasonable amount of time. In winter, we would stay in McDonald's (and Burger King, Wendy's, etc.) for hours once the sun set – not old enough to go to bars, not rich enough to have large homes to go to, fast food joints became our refuge. These are important spaces, because they allow communities to form in this way, and these massive corporations are the only ones willing to provide these types of spaces. Our city, and country, doesn't tend to believe in truly public space (heated, indoor, 24/7 accessible public plazas, for instance), especially if it means spending tax money. Instead we develop privately-owned public spaces – developers are given incentives to build public spaces when constructing new buildings, but in doing so we also give them authority over what kinds of actions occur in these spaces. Security guards will generally not allow a group of teenagers to hang around and be loud, while bonding, for five hours straight.

McDonald's also surpasses our other existing public spaces because of its unique reach. Midtown and downtown Manhattan have plenty of indoor private-public spaces, but most other neighborhoods have very few, if any. But every neighborhood has a fast food joint, which usually will offer you more liberty than these public plazas. You can eat, you can laugh, you can sleep. In a large enough McDonald's (like the one where this residency took place), you don't even really have to buy anything to claim some space (although to be safe it's probably good to at least buy a drink).

There are many creative practices that thrive in these semi-public spaces that lack proper definition, but the one that I personally have experience with is skateboarding. The majority of street spots where you can get time to skate before getting kicked out are public plazas, or elements of architecture that no one feels they own or value (cellar doors, stairs away from main entrances, etc.). Private spaces that people feel they own (or someone owns – many pedestrians interfere with skaters out of principle rather than personal interest) lead to quick kick-outs, or calls to security guards or police. It's not about the space itself, but it's perceived value.

Consider this: in the last ten years, New York City has constructed 11 free public skateparks (5 in Manhattan, 2 parks in Brooklyn, 3 in Queens, and 1 in the Bronx), as well as a few other spaces such as basketball courts with skatepark ledges in them. These are spaces that people want to use; however, most are only meant to be open while the sun is up (during the holiday season, this means they close around 4:30PM).

A recent anecdote: two weeks ago I was at the Manhattan Bridge skatepark with two friends, around 11PM. There is a sign on the gate saying that the park closes at 10, but the gate

was wide open. About twenty kids were using the park for its intended purpose, skateboarding. Two police officers came into the park, using the presence of skateboarders in a skatepark after closing as a reason to scan IDs, to try to catch some fish with pending warrants (no one had any warrants). This is a perversion of public space. Like McDonald's, the space must exist at its size, regardless of use or not (the park pays no rent and cannot change in scale), but instead of allowing the space to be used for its intended function all night, the city would rather let the space go empty for hours, in doing so throwing plenty of kids into limbo.



Flood lights for the tennis courts

The tennis courts off the west side highway in Tribeca, run by the Parks Department, have flood lights and are open until midnight (with the lights on), while the adjacent skatepark, also run by the Parks Department, has no lights and closes at dusk¹. The implication here is that skateboarders haven't earned the right to late-night public space for their activity, but the tennis players have. There is a definite socioeconomic element to this – most of the tennis players are financially secure 20-40-year-olds (if they live in a nearby neighborhood they'd have to be). Meanwhile, most of the skaters are teenagers, largely living off fast food deals (the McDonald's where this residency took place is consistently frequented by skaters coming from the skatepark). Because we don't efficiently use public space, we as a culture support institutions like McDonald's, because they fill the spatial vacuums we leave.

Coffee shops offer the upper-class equivalent of what McDonald's provides, and in doing so offer less – the ambiance is nicer, classier, with the same exchange (the purchase goods in exchange for space, usually with amenities like wifi), but these spaces are not 24/7, and there is often an attitude that you can only stay for an hour or two before you should leave (often due to space – no one has the amount of unused space as a large McDonald's).

Ironically, it is the lack of pleasant ambiance that makes McDonald's function so well as a studio space to me. Isolation and despair are important points of overlap and difference, simultaneously, between McDonald's and the artist's studio. The studio is a place to lock yourself away, with your things but without your external stimuli and entertainment – friends, television (usually), etc. McDonald's too, while offering some amenities, didn't have free television or other distractions that entail occupying the space without a specific intent. The amenities are class-based – wifi requires a smart phone or computer, while television is universally accessible. By doing this, McDonald's caters to a freelance-based demographic, but at the same time all demographics are welcomed to use the space. The staff never kick anyone out, even those who are sleeping – everyone can be there, but not everyone will want to. A successful studio space

¹: At the time of writing, lights were installed at the Wstington Heights skatepark, one of the most recently built skateparks in New York - a noticeable step in the right direction.

exists to limit distractions and house supplies / work – McDonald’s fulfills the first function with its selective amenities, and the only thing stopping McDonald’s from potentially being a fully formed studio building is its inability to do the second.

McDonald’s at first feels more social than the studio – there are other people around, it’s on street level. But as time passes it becomes clear that McDonald’s is more isolating to the artist than a studio building – there are no other artists working the same hours to bond with, and there is no socializing with the strangers that occupy the space. McDonald’s becomes depressing after long hours – the music become monotonous, the lighting seems too dim sometimes, and the food can leave you feeling slumped. But these are feelings also encountered during long studio sessions – depression, fear of missing out, despair at never finishing the work at hand. These emotions can be a necessary part of the creative cycle. The despair motivates you to finish the work faster, in order to leave and go home – if the studio is too fun, there’s no reason to finish the work and get out of there.

It became clear pretty quickly that our residency wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, except for the intention of it only lasting one week. There were locals that would come in every day (more consistently than the employees) and do specific things: one student would come every day, buy a large soda and continue reading an enormous book; one man would come in every day and read his Chinese newspaper; one older man would come at night in pajama pants, wander around, and sleep in the booths. We were all welcome.