As we look back at the past year off of the tail end of the Trump presidency, and over a year of Coronavirus, we realize in addition to the tragic loss of life, the pandemic has highlighted the issues that are caused or exacerbated by Late Stage Capitalism. According to Annie Lowry of The Atlantic, Late Stage Capitalism is “a catchall phrase for the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations and shrinking middle class.”(1) There is an overwhelming feeling of helplessness when confronting these problems. As we work to fix them, we must investigate how they perpetuate a broad range of other issues that continue today. Issues such as racism, nationalism, war, poverty, abuse of power, gun violence, surveillance, pollution, climate change and police brutality. While an individual does not have the power or resources to attack all of these at once, they do have the power to form community that are greater than the sum of its parts. My work began as a reaction to these issues and the systems they are a part of, and evolved into a step forward to working together to fix them.

Before we look ahead, it’s important to recognize the issues we face today. My early work in this process began by pointing out the inequality, indignities and absurdities that define Late Stage Capitalism, as well as the feeling that are associated with it. The system is rigged to help those who are already rich at the expense of everyone else. During the COVID pandemic, while most people were suffering from risk of dis-
ease or loss of income, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos became the first person to be worth $200 billion.(5) Obscenely wealthy companies are able to use their vast wealth to influence politics to avoid paying taxes that could be used to help people, such as Amazon paying $0 in Federal Income Tax in 2018.(6) Amazon is one of many large corporations who steal from the public, which I represented with a ski mask printed directly on a Nike shoebox.(12) Fig1 Those taxes could have been used to fix the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, where water was contaminated with dangerous amounts of lead from 2014-2019 that resulted in at least two people’s deaths.(8) Or instead of Jeff Bezos buying a super yacht that has its own yacht, he can pay for his employees to take longer breaks so they don’t have to pee in bottles to avoid going to the bathroom.(7)(9) I used silhouetted figures to represent the dehumanization and loss of personal identity that are a result of being defined only by your ability to earn money for someone else.- Fig2 I sourced images from stock photos and from advertisements, in order to reflect our identity as nothing more than consumers. The image of a shopping cart representing this consumerism is juxtaposed with the fragility and non uniform appearance of the handmade paper.Fig3

After recognizing and understanding these issues, we now look at what systems are acting to keep them in place. Capitalism is a pyramid scheme disguised as an economic system that succeeds based on profits for those few at the top at the expense of the majority of those at the bottom. This system is made up of manufacturers seeking profit from a market demand for necessities like food, healthcare and energy, or artificially inflated demands for weapons and military technology. One egregious example of this is Nestle trying to privatize water.(3) Capitalism in its late stage refers to the
logical conclusion of a system that values profit over people. Some of this work is specifically in response to another mistreatment of Amazon employees where they’re ranked by a “productivity index” in which movement is tracked in excruciating detail leading to suspending pay or firing.(10) This mistreatment is enforced by not allowing employees to unionize, Amazon even hired FBI agents to target worker activism. (11)

Law enforcement is used widely to enforce the status quo, by enforcing laws that unequally target minorities and lower economic class persons.(19) Due to systematic inequality, poverty rates are 27.4 percent among blacks, who are also 20 times more likely to have harsher prison sentences than whites.(13) This assumes impartiality in those enforcing the already unequal laws, unfortunately there is also an unaddressed and widespread infiltration of local and state level law enforcement by white supremacists.(14) In the words of Rage Against the Machine, “Some of those that work forces Are the same that burn crosses”. The killing of George Floyd this past year sparked nation wide protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter. His murder was caught on video which showed Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck for 9 minutes. George Floyd’s murder is tragically not unique in terms of state sponsored violence from the police, but maybe can be seen as a turning point due to the conviction of Derek Chauvin. Derek Chauvin was not alone, two others assisted him in restraining Floyd as he died, and another officer prevented the public from interfering. This is another reminder of the blue wall of silence where members of law enforcement protect each other from punishment involving police brutality.(15) This completes the well known phrase “One bad apple” with the less well known second half “….spoils the
bunch”. Fig 5 If one bad cop is protected by three good cops, then there are four bad
cops. The 2020 protests firmly asserted that police officers were on the side opposite
of the protestors, preferring to shut down demonstrations rather than address much
needed systematic change.

The result of increased police presence is a greater number of arrests and mass
incarceration. The prison industrial complex is the overlapping interests of government
and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to econom-
ic, social and political problems, which helps and maintains the authority of people
who get their power through racial, economic and other privileges. (16) The United
States criminal justice system is one based on punishment, not rehabilitation. There is
no incentive for those who own and operate the prisons to change this way because it
all but guarantees recidivism, the rate of under 21 year old offenders is 67.6 percent.
(18) Fig 6 Every prisoner is another source of revenue in a for-profit prison system, in
the form of free labor which is slavery legalized in the 13th Amendment “Neither slavery
nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall
have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States”. This is in stark contrast
to a country that claims to be land of the free. Fig 7

My work is intended to target the hypocrisy that is found in many white subur-
ban communities, with which I am very familiar as I have lived on Long Island NY for
most of my life. Many think that because the abuse of power by the police dispropor-
tionally targets minority communities, that they shouldn’t care, or that the victims are
somehow at fault. Even those who were asleep in their own homes, such as Breonna
Taylor, are not safe. It is my view that we are not free until everyone is free. Fig 8 That
equality begins with addressing the issues that are excessively affecting minority communities instead of turning a blind eye and saying the Republican catch phrase “Fuck you, I got mine”. The same conservatives who insist it is their god given right to have assault rifles as home defense. They view these guns as symbols of strength and power, but I see it as a weak attempt that instead shows their fragility. Fig 9 The phrase “you can’t be first but you could be next…” highlights the paranoia of white conservative gun owners worried about state sponsored violence towards private citizens, not realizing it is happening already.

Within late stage capitalism, there is a hint of optimism. “late stage” is an implication that capitalism and the world as we know it is on the way out and in its place is an opportunity to build a better future. In the meantime, we look at what can be done to dismantle the current systems. My idea to begin this transition took form as an ongoing project where I create art inspired by other artists. Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery and I take this to heart by copying and bootlegging other artists as a tribute to them and an invitation to continue the relationship. The subjects of the collaborations include friends close and distant, acquaintances, other artists I admire. Unauthorized collaborations reject the idea of capital in art. The works are made at no cost to the collaborator, primarily using free discarded materials. The use of these reused materials was inspired by the visible mending movement, which pushes for the acceptance of repairing and reusing clothes instead of contributing to the second largest source of pollution in the world. (4) I don’t sell any of these pieces, often printing duplicates to send to the subject of the work. My goal is that these bonds form and
continue past the initial interaction. From there, relationships with like minded people enables greater action starting at a local level.

**Technical Process**

Paper making by hand is a small scale process that involves breaking down materials into individual fibers which are then reformed into sheets or castings of paper. This begins by sourcing the material that will become paper. I used scraps of old prints and heavyweight printmaking paper. The prints included my own work as well as other fellow student’s work. Each piece is torn by hand into individual squares less than half an inch each. The breakdown is then done with a Hollander paper beater, a specialized tool that can work with a few gallons of water and paper at a time, over the course of an hour. Now the fibers and water are well combined as pulp. At this point, the pulp can be pulled on mold and deckles to create sheets of paper or in my case poured into molds to create cast paper sculptures. The molds I made are several layers of laser cut acrylic plexiglass stacked and glued together. I was unable to find anyone who would let me dip their firearms in silicone to make molds so I designed the molds digitally. The design is made in Illustrator and cut using a co2 laser. Each layer must be carefully aligned and glued using acrylic cement. The cement assures adhesion between the acrylic even when exposed to moisture for long durations from the wet pulp. The pulp in the mold is then left to dry, leaving a single strong layer of paper in the form of a low relief sculpture. Early in this process, the drying time took up to 4 days, depending on temperature, humidity and size of the mold. I eventually sourced a dehumidifier from a friend which cut the drying time to about a single day. This greatly im-
proved my output of finished castings. The paper is removed by shimmying a thin metal ruler under the deckled edges of the paper to loosen it until the entire cast can be removed. I then inspect for quality control of each piece, looking for consistent thickness of the paper and any cracks or rips. Pieces are arranged on foam core gator board to reference an American flag and held in place by miniature binder clips with attached pins.

Plotter printing is a unique blend of cutting edge graphics programs and dated mechanical printing technology. The tool I am using is an Axidraw V3 A3, a high precision XY pen plotter. It uses several small motors to move the arm along the X and Y axis as well as a stepper motor to lift the drawing tool up and down. Images are sourced from personal photos, stock/commercial photos for products, and other artists, in the case of unauthorized collaborations. Images are then edited and altered in Adobe Photoshop before being converted into vector graphics in Adobe Illustrator. Editing involves breaking down the images to their core characteristics of silhouettes and contour lines, typically down to 1-3 colors. Before being printed, several considerations must take place including, drawing implement, hatch fill, color, size and substrate. The working area of an Axidraw V3 A3 is 17x11 inches which limits the size and format of what is being printed. Any drawing implement that fits in the arm can be used, though some work better than others due to the nature of long continuous marks. Ink markers and gel pens both work extremely well due to being archival permanent marks. Gel pens have the added benefit of the ink sitting on top of the surface which is important to help the image stand out when using recycled materials that already have printed matter on them. Sakura Gelly Roll gel pens are my preferred choice
to their “paint-like ice cream smooth” marks and options for line width and effects such as metallic or sparkle inks. The Axidraw reads vector graphics, which means it just recognizes lines and not solid shapes. To draw these solid areas, a hatch fill must be used. The settings for the hatch fill can be changed to modify the angle and distance between lines. The choice of substrate must influence the printed image and sometimes influenced by the printed image. Many of the illustrations are simply on blank white archival machine made paper, others are on handmade paper or found prints, and discarded objects such as cardboard packages or mail envelopes. The prints are displayed in a salon style collage, acting as visual overload, attached to gator board by miniature binder clips with attached pins.
Bibliography


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Fig 2
Fig 8
Fig 9