

Customer Service

A Performance

By

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Customer Service is a half-hour storytelling performance that uses PowerPoint and drawing to discuss my experience working at a call centre in Moncton, New Brunswick. The performance uses this autofictional narrative to discuss labour in late capitalism and the toll it can take on mental health. The piece serves as a platform to combine a variety of my interests, from storytelling and drawing to pop-music, animation, and experimental theatre. Ultimately all of these elements fold back into *Customer Service* and contribute to the work's exploration of the tension between my personal need to escape capitalism and inability to do so.

Reserved for Acknowledgements

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General Introduction

My MFA thesis exhibition focuses on the storytelling performance, *Customer Service*. *Customer Service* employs projected hand-drawn images, alongside a script that I have written and perform live. It is a loose sequel to *the Water Lover*, a previous performance which explores my diagnosis with type 1 diabetes. Both artworks look at my struggles as an artist living with diabetes under the exploitative structure of capitalist realism.

The gallery space for *Customer Service* is set-up for the performance, and includes a call centre set/workstation consisting of a desktop computer, headset, office chair, desk, and cubicle divider. These objects not only set the scene, but are also functional in the performance. I sit in the chair during the performance, use the computer to play my slideshow, and the headset as a microphone. The exhibition also includes an audio work which approximates the sound of a call centre and 253 drawings from the rudimentarily animated sequence of *Customer Service*, hung on the gallery walls.

Customer Service is fundamentally focused on the tension between my personal need to escape capitalism and my inability to do so. Mark Fisher describes this tension in *Capitalist Realism*. Of the inescapability of capitalism, he writes, “the 80s were the period when capitalist realism was fought for and established, when Margaret Thatcher's doctrine that 'there is no alternative' - as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for - became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy” (8). Yet, Fisher also points out a correlation between mental health struggles and capitalism, suggesting that “instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high” (19).

However, although *Customer Service* draws on a variety of texts which are critical of capitalism, it is based on my own personal, lived experience struggling under capitalism and the tension between my need to escape capitalism and my inability to do so, a tension which I struggle with on a daily basis. This tension manifests itself throughout *Customer Service* and many of the influences on this performance—which is essentially an umbrella for me to explore a variety of my interests from comic art, to pop music, early animation and literature—ultimately feed back into the broader discussion the work is centered around. This paper explores the many ways in which *Customer Service* attempts, but ultimately fails to escape capitalism.

PowerPoint and Drawing: a description of the work in visual terms

The failed escape from capitalism is evident throughout *Customer Service*, from its broader philosophical investigations to its formal choices. In this section, I will talk about how the visual elements of the work contribute to this discussion.

Visually, my performances play directly into a capitalist aesthetic formed by what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer referred to as the *culture industry*, a term describing how the production of culture was industrialized by capitalism. This capitalist aesthetic is not consciously chosen, rather it is an aesthetic that is instinctual and comes from having been raised on the products of the culture industry. For example, all of my slideshows are created with Microsoft PowerPoint, a product sold by one of the most ubiquitous and successful companies of the twenty-first century. I grew up using this software in grade school and it feels familiar and natural to me. As a result, my performances rely on PowerPoint's slide transitions to create mini-animations and my approach to making my performances is deeply indebted to the platform.

In addition to liking how PowerPoint transitions between slides, I am also drawn to it as a non-art medium. It allows me to make work without the burden of Art History (a burden that pushed me away from painting in my undergrad). I also find something deeply appealing in the ubiquity of PowerPoint as a 21st century office and educational device, and in subverting it through art. Yet, this pedagogical element has inadvertently become part of my stories. In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin suggests that every story has some sort of lesson, or instruction, saying every real story “contains, openly or covertly something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers” (3). The pedagogical element of storytelling is explicit in *the Water Lover*, which provides listeners with the symptoms and risks of diabetes. While not as overt in *Customer Service*, the practical advice is still present. It serves, at the very least, as a warning about the hostility of call centres. However, the aesthetic and conceptual benefits offered by PowerPoint do not negate the tension that *Customer Service* simultaneously criticizes capitalism while relying on corporate software.

All of the images in *Customer Services* began as hand-drawn drawings. Drawing appeals to me in part because I have always drawn, but also because drawing, like storytelling, is an old artform. Despite the many ways my drawings depend on the culture industry, I see drawing as one of the few remaining activities where culture can be produced independent of the culture industry. My experience of culture is nearly always mediated through or produced by giant corporations—companies like Facebook (which owns Instagram), Google (which owns YouTube), Netflix, Disney, and Spotify. Drawing and storytelling are artforms that require little

in terms of resources to produce culture¹, and can be experienced in spaces which, although not completely void of, have the potential to be less controlled by the culture industry².

Both *the Water Lover* and *Customer Service* are drawn in India ink. As a result of advancements in printing technology (and the advent of Photoshop), contemporary comics are no longer dependent on the high-contrast mark of India ink, and my decision to draw with it is a conscious aesthetic choice. I taught myself to draw by copying older, ink drawn comics like *Peanuts*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, and *Tintin*, which originally appeared in newspapers and magazines (which, along with film and radio are the focuses of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry).

The drawings for *Customer Service* also have colour added to them digitally using Adobe Photoshop (fig. 1). This decision to use Photoshop for *Customer Service* is another area in which the tension between needing to escape capitalism, and not being able to, manifests itself. I have had to sign up for a one-year Adobe subscription, paying monthly to a giant tech company to add colour. I have done this, though only reluctantly, because my drawings greatly benefit from this addition as it makes them



Figure 1, a colour slide from *Customer Service*. 2019.

¹ Cartoonist Ivan Brunetti describes the immediacy of drawing well in *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* when he writes, "I often think that, were my arms to be cut off in some tragic accident, I would still feel compelled to scrape my gums against the sidewalk in order to create a comic strip with my own blood" (17).

² This is not to say I don't use platforms like Instagram to distribute and promote my art, I do, but my performances, can only be experienced fully in-person, and attempt to take place in spaces outside of the control of the culture industry.

clearer and easier to understand,³ giving them a sense of completion without overcoming the original ink drawings. To achieve this, I always keep the tones flat⁴. This is partly because it places priority on the drawn lines, but it also hints towards my love of screen printing. I began drawing comics seriously in a series of printmaking classes, and the way I think about tone and colour comes from having to consider my compositions as flat, separately printed layers. Since *Customer Service* takes place in the drab context of a call centre—a space where employees spend all day repeating the same call as many times as possible—I use flat gray tones along with limited colours (i.e. a peachy skin-tone and a sticky note yellow) to highlight the greyness of the work environment. In this way, the grayness suggests that the viewer is not seeing a world in grayscale, but rather a mostly gray world, making the colour that Photoshop has offered

Customer Service necessary in conveying the pure monotony of capitalism, while also still existing within it.

The final visual element of *Customer Service* is the physical call centre set in the gallery. The set was built mostly from scavenged materials



Figure 2, *the Water Lover* in performance in Saint John, NB, August 17, 2018.

and designed to look like a call centre workplace, like the one I was employed in. In *the Water*

³ But at the same time, is this need for colour just another part of the culture industry aesthetic? Adorno and Horkheimer write about the prevalence of the effect in the culture industry on page 125 of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The development of the culture industry has led to the predominance of the effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail of the work itself.”

⁴ The original, non-coloured drawings of the 253-drawing rudimentarily animated section of *Customer Service* are included in the exhibition. These are highly imperfect drawings, with visible pencil lines, smudges, creases, and even a couple coffee stains. The drawings are in effect process art and were not initially intended to be seen on their own, but are included in the exhibition to echo the critique of labour in the performance.

Lover, I began considering elements of my performances outside of the slideshow by wearing a costume that looks like the one worn by the protagonist (visible in fig. 2), and drinking from a glass of water⁵ throughout the performance, like the protagonist does. However, other elements, such as the computer and desk I sat at were not considered visually, and so, in addition to wearing a call centre-esque outfit (shorts and a Prince t-shirt) in *Customer Service*, I have created a set which the performance can be performed from that visually resembles the cubicle visible in Figure 3. Part of my decision to have the narrator don a t-shirt of a pop-musician like Prince is to visually implicate him as a dedicated consumer of culture, and not someone who critiques the culture industry from outside.



Figure 3, a slide from *Customer Service* depicting the call-centre space.

Visually, the look of *Customer Service* is in dialogue with the broader discussion of the performance, namely the tension between needing to escape capitalism, but not being able to. This tension manifests itself in *Customer Service* as a look that is derived from the products of the culture industry. These products include comics, PowerPoint, Photoshop, and even the narrator's Prince t-shirt. They come from the culture industry and are products of capitalism, yet are used in *Customer Service* to mount a critique of capitalism.

⁵ Dehydration is a major symptom of diabetes, and the protagonist of *the Water Lover* is constantly drinking water.

Living Speech: how the work is created and why

In the same way my visual approach to *Customer Service* is in dialogue with the critique of capitalism imbedded in the work, the personal narrative of *Customer Service* that this critique is delivered through is important when discussing the inescapability of capitalism. While this work is addressing broad social concerns, it is doing so on a personal level. This is important because capitalism is a force which acts upon its subjects daily, and has a daily impact on its subjects' lives⁶.

The stories I decide to tell in my performances are always ones from my own life, and are usually ones I have wanted to tell for a long time. I often casually tell them to anyone who'll listen for years before turning them into performances. Because I have lived with these stories for so long before translating them into performances, I have a basic understanding of where I want the narratives to go when I begin writing them down. I also have a number of vivid images in my mind which serve as a starting point for my drawings.

One of the most crucial ways I have made *Customer Service* feel like it relates to real life is to have the speech in it sound natural. I did this by writing it for an oral performance. In "the Storyteller," Benjamin discusses how the solitude which novelists tend to write in carries itself into the form of the novel (3). While I have occasionally had this solitude enter into my performances, I have been hypervigilant to extract it from *Customer Service*, performing, reworking, then reperforming each version of the script until it feels like living, daily speech, thus relating the discussion of capitalism directly to the everyday.

⁶ For example, Mark Fisher spends a great deal of *Capitalist Realism* discussing how mental health issues are exasperated by capitalism (19).

Capitalist Realism: a conceptual underpinning of the work

Underpinning the personal narrative of *Customer Service*, which is based off my experience working at a call centre, is a critique of capitalism, largely based off of Mark Fisher's 2009 work *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. In it, Fisher discusses the way that capitalism is both unsustainable and inescapable. I ended up at a call centre nearly by chance. I had just been diagnosed with diabetes and needed health insurance, and the only jobs with health insurance that were hiring were with call centres. However, the call center phenomenon is also a much broader one, as Fisher succinctly puts it, "the paradigmatic labourer is now the call centre worker – the banal cyborg, punished whenever they unplug from the communicative matrix" (*Ghosts of My Life* 174)⁷. As much as *Customer Service* is a personal distillation of my experiences working at a call centre, it is also a broader discussion of the call center workplace as it sits in 21st century capitalism.

One of the hardest things about working at a call centre is the fact that the employee is essentially a human, flesh barrier between irate customers and a company that doesn't want to talk to them, but wants to give the appearance of listening. Fisher writes that,

The call center experience distils the political phenomenology of late capitalism: the boredom and frustration punctuated by cheerily piped PR, the repeating of the same dreary details many times to different poorly trained and badly informed operatives, the building rage that must remain impotent because it can have no legitimate object, since – as is very quickly clear to the caller – there is no-one who knows, and no-one who could do anything even if they could.

(*Capitalist Realism* 64)

⁷ I interpret this remark literally, as call centre employees are physically attached to their phones and computers through their headsets.

Fisher's description of the call center speaks directly to my experience of working at a call centre, providing "Cheerly piped PR" about how good of a phone replacement the caller would get, while also being one of the "badly informed operatives," who couldn't do anything to really help. The company I worked for wanted employees to read a script as friendly and as empathetically as possible, then end the call. This fake-caring manifests itself in the audio I have recorded for the performance, which has been built from friends and acquaintances of mine stumbling through call centre scripts I wrote based off some of the calls I encountered at work, while speaking as empathetically as they can.

In *Dead Man Working*, Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming argue that the modern office worker is engaged in a state of living death. They write that, "Although dead, we are nevertheless compelled to wear the exterior signs of life" (4). The only part of my call centre job a computer could not do was to offer empathy and understanding, to supply the exterior signs of life that soothed the anger of callers. What I was required to do was demonstrate that a person who cared was on the other end, but I was essentially an appendage to a computer⁸. As is discussed in the performance (Appendix I, lines 110 to 112), lunch breaks at the call centre varied from day to day based on call volumes. Eating habits were literally chosen based off when it would be most efficient for the computers, which, for a diabetic on a fixed meal schedule, was a very difficult—and nearly impossible—thing to do.

Ironically, even though I was required to provide exterior signs of life on calls, it was made quite clear that I shouldn't give too many. Calls needed to be fast. The empathy needed to be delivered and then moved on from. There was a constant pressure to do better and to be faster (this pressure persists throughout *Customer Service*). For my employer, time literally was money

⁸ In *Malign Velocities*, Benjamin Noys cites Karl Marx, stating, "Marx noted that the trend of capitalist production is to reduce us to a 'mere appendage' of the machine" (41).

and they were desperately pinching every penny. There was however a strange disconnect between the company's broader accelerationist approach to labour and the mundanity of my job. In *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*, Benjamin Noys notes that, "the experience of most work is of profound boredom and pointlessness – hardly one of acceleration. Work is the eternal 'hell of the same', as Baudrillard put it – repetitive and often ridiculous tasks to no good or even useful end" (46). This is as succinct a description of the call center experience as I have been able to find, and I constantly found myself doodling, or even reading on calls, bored by the words I had to say (depicted in figs. 1 and 3) while simultaneously trying to increase their speed. This "hell of the same" is present throughout the narration of *Customer Service*, particularly when I speak about the call centre script slipping into my everyday life in line 94 and my dreams (lines 95 and 96). It was the linguistic equivalent of the twitch Charlie Chaplin's character, the Tramp, experiences when working on a factory line in the film *Modern Times*. He is unable to stop the one motion he performs all day long when not working, eventually leading him to be hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. I have also tried to emphasize this hellish repetition in my thesis exhibition by including the entire two-hundred-and-fifty-three drawings which form a rudimentary animated sequence in *Customer Service*, and which physically consisted of redrawing the same drawing—but making one small change each time—up to twenty times a day.

Indeed, the call centre's excruciating demand of their employees, has a profoundly unbalancing effect on employee's mental health (particularly for those employees, who I was back then, are mentally unstable). Mark Fisher touches on this repeatedly in *Capitalist Realism*, suggesting that capitalism is at the heart of today's mental health epidemic. He writes that, "It seems that with post-Fordism, the 'invisible plague' of psychiatric and affective disorders that

has spread, silently and stealthily, since around 1750 (i.e. the very onset of industrial capitalism) has reached a new level of acuteness” (35). And, while it is hard to discern whether capitalism, diabetes, or both were responsible for my mental deterioration while working at a call centre, I certainly attribute capitalism with exasperating my mental state to the point in which I would hope to hit a moose on the way into work (Appendix I, Line 124).

Ultimately, I quit because I was not able to resign myself to the state of living death that capitalism demands of its labourers. However, I have not been able to fully escape the need for money, which has created a vicious cycle, where I keep bouncing between being employed and being happy.

Bob Dylan and Storytelling: theoretical influences that serve as points of departure

The push and pull with capitalism that *Customer Service* is engaged with is also present in how it interacts with the form of storytelling. Undoubtedly, one of the most popular and fastest growing storytelling venues today is the podcast. I would argue that podcasts have become so popular because they are a form that the culture industry uses to sell storytelling⁹. Yet, as with drawing, I see storytelling as one of the few artforms that despite being coopted by the culture industry, can still manage to exist outside of it.

In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin suggests that storytelling was in decline in his day because experience no longer carried the same value it once did (1). I was introduced to storytelling through my grandfather, and although his approach is different from my own, it has served as an important model for me. He has always loved telling stories at family suppers—stories that tend to be drawn out narratives about his youth. As soon my family and I got in the

⁹ I’ve just noticed Spotify now carries podcasts.

car to go home after one of these suppers, my dad would comment on how much of a bore his father-in-law had been. Although my father has never been interested in these stories, I always have been. The way in which my grandfather had clearly thought them through, and was conscious of the pacing was evident. After my grandmother's funeral, he told a story about how they first met which reduced the entire room to tears. Later, he told me he'd been practicing it all week.

In Benjamin's description, there are two main types of storytellers, the trading seaman and the resident teller (2). Since my grandfather's stories nearly always related to his travels, he fits the archetype of the seaman rather nicely. On the other hand, my approach to storytelling has always been that of the resident teller. Benjamin writes that people enjoy "listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions" (2). All of my stories are based on what happened to me at home. They are stories collected through everyday life, and in my stories, I try to peel back the layers on smaller experiences, such as the daily experience of living with illness and capitalism.

Benjamin was writing about storytelling at the advent of the culture industry, and the industrialisation of storytelling which took place throughout the twentieth century. As he was writing, capitalism was beginning its long coopting of the art of storytelling. Today, one of the few spaces where stories can be told unmediated by the culture industry are ones like the family suppers (if they still exist) where my grandfather told his tales. In my performances, I have actively tried to make space for the sort of archaic, unmonetized storytelling I learnt from my grandfather, which can exist outside of capitalism¹⁰.

¹⁰ Of course, I have made money from these slideshows (although they have never been profitable), but their goal, unlike the goal of products sold by the culture industry has never been to make money.

This type of storytelling is inherently oral. Benjamin writes about how through the development of the novel, stories have become increasingly internal and narratives have been “gradually removed [...] from the realm of living speech” (3). As mentioned while discussing the process for creating these performances, I have gone to great lengths to base my stories in living speech. In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott discusses the process of writing, and says, “the truth of your experience can *only* come through in your own voice. If it was wrapped in someone else’s voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed in someone else’s clothes” (199). I think this is particularly true in my performances, as my voice is literally present in the work¹¹. If I started talking in a non-New Brunswick dialect or with an accent that was not my own, it would become immediately apparent, and the whole thing would fall apart.

Undoubtedly, one of the twentieth and twenty-first century performers whose work is perhaps the most deeply rooted in living speech is American pop-musician Bob Dylan. While Dylan’s output has done immensely well as a product of the culture industry, his songs are fundamentally based in storytelling, and deeply rooted in living speech¹². In *Performed Literature* Betsy Bowden examines Dylan as an oral performer who is part of a long history. She states,

Those with higher education—those that is, with money—set up as many dichotomies as possible to distinguish their own “high” culture from that of the masses, including a dichotomy of written v. oral literature that is particularly unsound for drama and for the

¹¹ Even though it is often mediated through technological means.

¹² There are too many examples for me to cite here, but one example is “Tangled Up in Blue” which goes, “She lit a burner on the stove / and offered me a pipe / ‘I thought you'd never say hello,’ she said / ‘You look like the silent type.’”

medieval manuscripts, which survive as texts but were nearly always performed aloud¹³.

(4)

Bowden is particularly interested in the way in which oral literature has advantages over its written counterpart, suggesting that oral texts can, through performance, resolve “ambiguities, tensions, conflicts, opposition” (24). While it is true that Dylan resolves textual ambiguities through performance, his approach to performing is one that resolves ambiguities differently in each separate performance, and this approach directly influences mine. Throughout his career, Dylan has been known to constantly rework songs in performance, often repeatedly reinventing them. *New Yorker* reporter Alex Ross followed Dylan on the road for a week in 1998, and described the experience as follows, “He writes a little more every night; I keep hearing fresh bluesy bits of tunes in ‘Tangled Up in Blue,’ which was at the center of every set [...] You can hear him thinking through the music bar by bar: he has a way of tracing out his chords in winding one-note patterns and bringing them alive. And the basic structure of the songs are unshakeable. There is never a wrong chord” (58). While, Ross speaks primarily about the song’s shifting music, Dylan is also constantly shifting his delivery of the music in performance. The slightest shift in phrasing can totally change the meaning of one of Dylan’s songs, creating new tensions and conflicts or resolving old ones¹⁴.

However, Dylan has also gone much further than that, repeatedly creating totally unique iterations of the same song. Perhaps the best-known example of this is “Tangled Up in Blue,” which there are three lyrically distinct, officially released recordings, as well as innumerable in-

¹³I think it’s worth pointing out the link between the influence of comics in my work—which historically have been seen as low culture—and oral performance, which Bowden lumps into the same category.

¹⁴Chapter 4 of *Performed Literature* (73-105), for example, focuses on four distinct performances of “Like a Rolling Stone.”

concert variations¹⁵. Ross's assertion that there is not a wrong chord in Dylan's songs can also be applied to his words. No matter how much "Tangled Up in Blue" has been rewritten, it has remained the same song. While Dylan's endless performing has certainly made him, and many other people rich, it has also bumped up against the culture industry and illustrated the way in which oral art, especially the type that shifts and evolves through performance, is difficult for the culture industry to market. Ross begins his essay by writing about how many people have thought Dylan would be easier to understand—and undoubtedly market—if he'd died in the sixties, instead of constantly touring and endlessly shifting his songs (56).

I have repeatedly tried to use Dylan's ever-shifting approach in my performances, deliberately and repeatedly shifting and altering them on stage. I have performed ever shifting versions of *the Water Lover* since completing it in April 2018 in venues from contemporary art festivals to living rooms, and while I am only just beginning to perform *Customer Service* during my thesis exhibition, I already have three performances scheduled throughout the following months in which I will continue to push and alter its form. My performances are deeply rooted in the tradition of storytelling and draw on Dylan's fluid and ever evolving, never completed approach to performing, and take on ever-shifting forms, incorporating variation as a fundamental part of their structure. And, while the podcast has managed to incorporate storytelling into the culture industry, the fluctuating approach to storytelling that I use provides a space in which it can exist without being turned into a product of the culture industry.

¹⁵ See the versions released on the *Bootleg Series 1-3*, *Blood on the Tracks*, and *Real Live*. In addition, the two times I have seen him perform "Tangled Up in Blue" live (on July 16, 2016 and on June 30, 2017), he performed reworked versions of the lyrics and music.

Performance and Animation: the work in relation to contemporary art practice/contemporary culture

While researching the exhibition, *the Sensual World*, which I curated on contemporary comic artists whose practices bridge the art and comics worlds, I found a number of contemporary graphic novelists who also worked in animation in a small, handmade manner, unlike the animations made by—say—Disney¹⁶. The relationship between comics and animations is logical, since comics and animation have essentially the same building blocks: images and narrative. In my slideshows, I am interested in exploring the space in-between comics and animation, where images are no longer confined to the static page as in a comic, but perhaps do not move as much as they would in a full-blown animation¹⁷.

Perhaps the best artist to mention when discussing space in-between comics and animation is Winsor Mccay. Mccay, who is best known for his comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which ran in the early twentieth century, was a pioneer in comics, animation and also frequently blended the two in vaudeville performances. Mccay made three animated films, including 1914's *Gertie*. Before it was released as an animated film by Fox (Nathan and Crafton 33), Mccay would present the film during vaudeville routines, and go on stage to interact with its title character, a prehistoric dinosaur, acting as Gertie's trainer (25). While it has been frequently claimed both by Mccay and Fox that *Gertie* consisted of over ten thousand individual drawings (35 and 40), Nathan and Crafton spend a great deal of their essay proving that this is highly unlikely, to the point of nearly being impossible, and estimate in actuality he made between 2,500 and 3,500 drawings (40). However, I can see why Mccay and Fox would want to

¹⁶ *The Sensual World* included two animations, *Margaret's Mountain* by Elisabeth Belliveau and *Noodles/Nouilles* by Julie Doucet.

¹⁷ Animation, especially mainstream animation, is an artform that requires a lot of overhead to produce, and often depends on sweatshop like animation facilities where assembly lines of artists produce them.

exaggerate the amount of drawings. The 253-drawing animation I have included in *Customer Service*, took me from September 2018 to February 2019 to complete, and, unlike Mccay's animations (he was an exquisite draughtsman), was incredibly sloppily drawn¹⁸. Played at the slow rate of two and a half frames per second, the entire animated sequence in *Customer Service* takes a minute and forty-four seconds to play. I was so distraught when I discovered this that, to make it seem longer, I decided to break it up into two sections. In this way, the animated section of *Customer Service* is also criticizing the unseen labour in every animation produced by the culture industry. While Mccay's work and innovation in animation was used as the groundwork for many culture industry giants, including Disney (Nathan and Crafton 24), he produced these works before, or at the dawn of the culture industry, outside of an industrialized system of cultural production. I see my decision to include these drawings in the exhibition similar to William Kentridge's insistence to show the working drawings for his series of hand-drawn animations, *Drawings for Projection* along with the films (Krauss 102). While Mccay's exaggerations emphasized labour to make it visible, Kentridge makes the labour of animation visible by including it in exhibitions, which is what (instead of exaggerating) I have decided to do.

However, while I see *Gertie* as an important precursor to how I have approached performance, and to performing comics. Its influence on me and relevance to my performances is limited since, it is an overtly comedic work and a work that seeks to dazzle by showing off Mccay's technical mastery, and not so much an exercise in storytelling. For this reason, my performances relate more directly to other storytelling practices, such as the experimental theatre works of Daniel Barrow, Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray. My work, in particular bears a

¹⁸ One of the reasons the animation took me so long was because I made it in school, and I did not work on it eight hours a day during its production.

strong resemblance to Gray's storytelling practice. For example, Gray's performance *Swimming to Cambodia* (which I have seen in its 1987 filmed version), is based on a personal experience, Gray's time working on the 1984 film *the Killing Fields*, yet it also touches on the Cambodian genocide (which is also the subject of *the Killing Fields*). In this way, it offers what Benjamin discusses as the useful information a story offers. Gray frames an educational lecture with a personal experience, in a manner similar to what I have attempted to do in *Customer Service*. Furthermore, Gray's performance includes sparse use of props, integrated seamlessly into the performance, including two maps, a pointing stick, a notebook (with letters tucked inside) and a glass of water. While I have used PowerPoint partly for its link to educational environments, Gray's use of maps and a pointing stick throughout *Swimming to Cambodia* call to mind a pre-PowerPoint teacher's instructional methods. And, although I have only seen film versions of Gray's performances, Jonathan Demme, the director of the filmed iteration of *Swimming to Cambodia*, mentioned in an interview included on the DVD, that in the year Gray performed the work, it shifted and evolved, shrinking from around four hours to two. While my performances are typically in the twenty minutes to half-an-hour zone, they are also tied to Gray's work through their shifting nature. Although there are notable differences between my and Gray's approach to performing, most significantly my use of drawings, *Swimming to Cambodia*, with its autofictional oral narrative and educational components is perhaps the most relevant touching point for considering how my slideshows relate to contemporary culture. As I have mentioned with Bob Dylan, this shifting nature of performance contains an inherently anti-capitalist element to it, one that is echoed by my labour-heavy approach to animation in *Customer Service*.

A Conclusion

One of the only things that has given me respite from capitalism in the past few years has been my MFA, which is now nearing its end. While in some ways I find myself longing for another year of school, a second master's, or even a PhD, I also consider the way in which my performances, which have served as an umbrella for me to explore my artistic and theoretical influences, have provided a space to explore tensions between the inescapability and unsustainability of capitalism. While, my work overtly criticizes capitalism, it is not separate from it, and this tension pervades both the form and content of *Customer Service*. And though *Customer Service* ultimately does not offer a solution to escape it, perhaps one may emerge through its repeated performance.

Appendix I: *Customer Service Script*¹⁹

- 1) Y'know, when I was in my last year of undergrad, I had this plan for what I wanted to do with my life after I graduated school.
- 2) At some point in the fall, I attended this workshop at Struts Gallery on achieving your goals,
- 3) And the workshop leader talked about taking a big goal of yours, and breaking it up into small, manageable, bite sized, chunks.
- 4) Chunks that were small enough that you could do them without being intimidated by their size.
- 5) The goal I had for myself was to be a published author within two years.
- 6) The instructor seemed to think it was unrealistic, but I had real, concrete steps I could take.
 - a. One: Write a book
 - b. Two: Cozy up to a publisher
 - c. Three: Get the publisher who I'd previously cozied up with to publish the book I'd written.
- 7) I mean, I'm giving you the condensed version, I also had a lot of specifics in there that I felt I could realistically achieve.
- 8) Like, for example, I already had met two publishers. One was my friend's mom, she ran this pretty successful Fredericton publishing company, and another was this guy who tabled at a zine fair in town that I ran. We seemed to get along pretty well he'd been back for several years, and any time I'd see him, he would buy my comics, and tell me how much he liked the last ones, so I figured he might realistically publish me.
- 9) Also, I was going to apply for an artsNB grant the second I got out of school to fund my book, and I was going to get the grant, because I had heard at a grant writing workshop that New Brunswick has a very

¹⁹ The script I have included here is what I use to perform from. It is not proofread and edited to the level of an academic essay. Partly, this is because my performance scripts are constant state of flux.

high grant success ratio compared to, say Ontario, and I thought well if there's one thing this shithole province is good for, it'll be getting grants.

10) But then came the diabetes, and everything went to hell.

11) I was soon broke and desperately looking for jobs.

12) Actually, maybe I was a little more than broke. To me, broke means you're out of money. I wasn't just out of money, I had at most a hundred dollars in my checking account and owed three thousand of dollars on my credit card.

13) And, you know, I applied for a shit-ton of jobs, but having done an art degree and never having worked in high school, heard back from next to nothing.

14) Some days I could barely muster the energy to apply to anything.

15) It all just seemed so futile to me.

16) Sometimes, I'd just spend the afternoon in bed, wishing I was one of those millennials who had moved back in with their parents after university, who took some time to figure out what to do next. It would have really made diabetes more affordable too—not having to pay for food or rent, and all that.

17) There were two reasons for this, first, I never really liked Fredericton, and second, my girlfriend thought my parents were really weird and under no circumstances would she consider moving in with them.

18) So, I decided to stick it out in Sackville.

19) Eventually, I got an interview with a call center in Moncton—which was about (for those of you who are unfamiliar with the geography of New Brunswick) half an hour from Sackville—for a job processing phone insurance claims, and which paid 13 dollars an hour and on the first of the month six weeks after we passed through training (which I understood to be June 1) would offer health insurance.

20) I went for two interviews. One was one on one, and one was with a group. They'd ask all these weird questions like "how can you be a hero at work," that seemed to demand fake bull-shit answers (which, of course, I gave). But I mean, it was sorta weird, I wasn't applying to be a firefighter.

- 21) And it was also weird to me that after a month of applying to jobs this was the first place to offer me an interview, and they seemed to be hiring every person who applied.
- 22) A lot of people warned me about working in a call centre. They told me about how awful it was and about how tiring or demeaning it can be, but I found the people at my work were nice and welcoming, and we weren't doing outgoing calls, which from what I could tell was the thing that's really bleak
- 23) And, it seemed like they were at least trying to be a good workplace, on the first day of training, they even brought muffins and coffee in for us.
- 24) I couldn't eat any, because back then I was on a fixed diet, and could only eat anything more than a granola bar or an apple every four to six hours, but it was still a nice gesture.
- 25) Beside that slight disappointment, training was great. We did some serious things, like learning how to take calls, getting imputed into the system, or learning what acceptable work place behaviour was, but if felt like mostly we played games to get to know each other, and would eat lunch together and talk about our lives.
- 26) During the training week though, it became pretty quickly apparent that this was a job that didn't require you to be totally there. The training modules would have text on a screen which took ten seconds to read, yet the computer voice would take a minute to read it out loud, and during that time—the fifty seconds per slide—I'd just sit at my desk and draw the view from the window, or the other trainees, if I could see them.
- 27) Here are some of the drawings from that week:
- a. She's had recently immigrated from Bangladesh
 - b. She was a out of work dental hygienist and recent mother
 - c. He had two DUI's and thought it was funny,
 - d. The mother again
 - e. And she was seventeen and had less money than I did

- 28) It seemed to me that as long as you knew a few basic points about the insurance coverage and why certain choices were being made, so you could explain them to the person on the other end of the line, all you really had to do was follow the prompts that would come up on the computer screen when you took a call and say them with empathy and understanding, like “I’m so sorry to hear that,” and “I’m here to help.”
- 29) We practiced doing fake calls with each other in the first week and I got pretty good at doing them but things changed on the afternoon of the first Friday when we went upstairs and I took my first call.
- 30) One of the main things you were supposed to do, other than offer empathy and understanding, was take control of the conversation, to keep it moving. Calls were supposed to be done in under two-and-a-half minutes, so you really just had to get the answers out of the people calling and move on.
- 31) This was something that was hard to practice downstairs, because we’d always go pretty easy on each other.
- 32) But upstairs it was a bit more unhinged. my first afternoon on the floor was a total whirlwind.
- 33) Not only did I have trouble taking control of the calls—some of these callers could be very assertive—but I also didn’t realize that with, like two hundred people making calls at the same time, the second floor was incredibly loud and I had a hard time hearing the people in my shitty ear-piece when there was so much going on around me.
- 34) I remember shaking as I left for my car at the end of my first afternoon on the floor, and thinking “how the fuck am I going to do this?”
- 35) the weekend that followed that hellish afternoon sort of set the tone for the rest of my weekends while I was working at the call centre.
- 36) While, I had really wanted to get to work on the book I’d applied to ArtsNB with—when I got home, my friend’s band—who I’d done an album cover for—was having their album launch at one of the bars

downtown, so I went out, talked to people about my new job, saw a great show, and woke up at one on Saturday.

- 37) And it was one of those slow wake ups, where you watch Netflix for like three hours in before deciding to go to the coffee shop and then walk through the park, and while you're out, get a text from your friend asking if you'd like to meet up for supper in half-an-hour at Mel's, and then you guys go to the bar for trivia and you stay till midnight before going home working for half an hour and deciding you're too tired, and you decide Sunday is your day for work.
- 38) I kind of thought when I got back to call centre on Monday that I could work on my book on the side while I took calls. I had a sketchbook with me. You know, like I could plan out panels, draw characters, but it was just too much brain energy. I had only mental energy to draw things that were either right in front of me—which now that we'd moved upstairs was a cubicle divider—or myself.
- 39) So, as I struggled on my calls, I just started drawing myself on this little white erasable surface on my desk for making notes, over and over again.
- 40) Any time I finished a drawing, I'd photograph it and just start again.
- 41) On my breaks, I'd post my drawings to Instagram, and hope to get more likes than I got the day before, but that never seemed to happen. You know, I'd been researching how to make it as an Instagram artist, and one of the main things that kept coming up was to post every day, in order to build an audience, presumably with your charm and your wit, and I tried to do that for a while in my spare time back then, but it never panned out.
- 42) I'd also—whenever I got bored of drawing myself—read a little while on calls. The first book I read was *Chronicles*, Bob Dylan's memoir about a bunch of random points in his life, which I found for a dollar at the Sackville Sally Ann. Then I moved onto *Just Kids*, by Patti Smith. Actually, I might have also read something by John Updike I can't remember between the two.

- 43) My girlfriend had given my Just Kids for either my birthday or Christmas that year or the year before—I know I'd had it for a while—and I decided to read it one day after hearing her cover of "When Doves Cry" after Prince died. I figured if she was a Prince fan too, I could relate to her.
- 44) I feel like I was the last person to find out about Just Kids, when I mentioned I was reading it at trivia, all my friends told me how much they loved it, but in case you're like me and are late to the Patti Smith game, it's a book about her early years trying to make it as an artist, and her friendship with Robert Mapplethorpe, who was both her roommate, and also trying to make it as an artist.
- 45) Two things about this second week are kind of worth pointing out.
- 46) First, by the second Monday, about 3 people of our 12-person training group had already left their job at the call centre.
- 47) Second, while some of the other trainees were getting the hang of the calls, I was not.
- 48) We watched over the week as our group's average call time dropped from like five minutes a call to closer and closer to the target average of two-and-a-half minutes.
- 49) But my calls were not dropping.
- 50) I had a lot of trouble taking control of the conversation, steering it back on track.
- 51) I just wasn't getting it. It wasn't clicking, I was constantly trying to get control of my calls and just wasn't working.
- 52) I just listened too the callers too much, let them complain about the broken phone and about how much they felt they were being ripped off by the insurance and how this was ruining their life, and I didn't try to shut them up.
- 53) Anyways, at the end of the second week, the eight of us who remained were thrown a pizza party to celebrate the end of training. It was on our lunch break too, so I could have a couple slices (well, squares). Which was a nice treat, because I had stopped buying pizza after getting diabetes. Anyways, they gave out awards form the shortest average call time, the most improved call time, and the best customer

satisfaction (which was determined by a short survey given to each caller at the end of each call, and Lo and Behold I won! I had the highest rating.

54) The trick was gentry mentioning to the caller that you hoped you were able to give them the five-star service that they deserved today. My award was a twenty-five-dollar pre-paid credit card, which I used to buy my first Patti Smith album after work at Spin-It, the Moncton record store.

55) Ant that was really nice. It made me feel that although my calls were long, too long even, that I was at least likable, and that I was making people's calls as unmiserable as possible.

56) Anyways, although we had started working from 10 to 6 Monday to Friday in the first two weeks,

57) By week 3, we moved to our actual, non-training schedule.

58) Which, for me was Sunday to Thursday, 2:30 to 11 pm, except on Sundays, which I worked 1 to 10.

59) So, often, since the commute was about forty minutes for me, meant I wouldn't get home until at least midnight, sometimes, if I was low on gas it would take even longer, because by that time most of the gas stations in Moncton were closed, and I'd have to drive around town until I found an open one.

60) Often, I would only see my girlfriend for about an hour a day, when she came home for lunch.

61) And even worse than that, the drive from Moncton to Sackville was along a long a dark, winding stretch of the TransCanada, famous for how many Moose were on the road in summer.

62) Every day I drove that road I worried about hitting a moose. I kept rehearsing in my head what to do when you see a moose on the road.

63) Thinking back to Drivers' ED, hoping I remembered my instructor right when he said to break, but if you can't stop in time to speed up at the last second so that the hood of the car points up and the moose doesn't come crashing down on the window.

64) On top of that primal fear, I found it pretty hard to stay awake driving so late at night.

65) So, what I'd do, was I'd fill up two thermoses with coffee—one of the perks of this job was coffee was provided for free—before hitting the road, and put on whatever Prince album I was feeling that day—I

seem to recall listening a lot to the Gold Experience back then—and blast it, singing along at the top of my lungs the whole drive home, just desperately trying to stay awake. Even though I'd stay up for hours after getting home, something about driving in the pitch black really made me sleepy.

66) Often, I'd also have to resort to slapping my face during the last ten-minute stretch on the highway before I got to Sackville

67) I was pretty optimistic about the call centre when I started there, but as the job started to really get under way, I started finding more and more issues with it, such as the effect it had on my free time.

68) What would happen, since I didn't have to work until 2:30, is I figured this would give me plenty of time to work on my book each morning.

69) I thought I could wake up at eight, get a good four hours in before heading to my job,

70) But somehow I could never manage it.

71) Like, I could never wake up at eight, and then I would be always so slow to get moving, so what ended up happening is after I'd get home from the call centre around midnight, I'd have a bit of a meal, and then start working on my book at one for a couple hours.

72) And then of course this kept pushing my wake-up time later and later, it took about a week before I would just wake up at noon when my girlfriend got home for lunch and we'd talk for a bit, she'd complain about her job, and then I'd have to get going.

73) So, I would end up in my studio at midnight

74) And I'd put on a record, sit down

75) And tell myself I'd draw a page, no matter how bad it was

76) But, it was pretty demoralizing because after a month I still hadn't produced a good page.

77) I had spent all this time writing what my book was going to be about to artsNB, after I'd gotten diabetes, I'd developed this weird obsession over my high school girlfriend, and had pictured writing a book about our relationship that somehow encapsulated all the major social issues of the twenty-first century.

- 78) And writing about it killed it before it was even born.
- 79) Mostly, as I drew, I just stumbled aimlessly through the fog
- 80) Although, on occasion, I'd end up producing something unrelated to my book which I kind of liked.
- 81) One of those things was a short comic about the call center I made on a couple cue cards:
- 82) Now, because my work-life encroached so much on my free time, I would give myself as little time as possible to get to work, just to squeeze out a couple extra minutes to draw each day.
- 83) Which usually meant driving 140 the whole way to make it in on time.
- 84) My supervisor once spoke to me about my cutting it so close, he said "The other day you signed in at 2:35, and if you'd have signed in one minute later, you would have been flagged as late and that would have put you in retraining and last week there were a couple times you signed in at 2:32 and so maybe you should consider giving yourself a bit more time, maybe try leaving an hour before work just to be safe."
- 85) And that really just rubbed me the wrong way. I mean I though I'm already wasting eight fucking hours of my day at this place, and then you want me to waste another hour just so I can be here extra early? Fuck that and FUCK YOU!
- 86) This was a job and I didn't want to give it anything more than I had to so I could afford to live.
- 87) Another time, actually, my supervisor pulled me aside, probably after the first month, and he asked me "where do you envision yourself going at this company? Do you want to move up, become maybe an adjustor (these were the people that investigated insurance fraud)? How long do you see yourself living in Sackville for? Wouldn't it save you a lot of time if you lived closer to here?"
- 88) I just told him, you know I'm still just trying to get the ropes (my call times were by far the worst in the 7 remaining of my group who had trained together AND my attempts at shortening my class had had a negative effect on my customer satisfaction surveys, which were the one thing I had going for me!). But

man, this also really irked me. Like why would I move from this town and all my friends for this crap job?
Made no sense.

89) These weren't even the worst interactions I had with my supervisor. Once, he yelled at me for testing my blood sugar because he thought I had my cell phone out on the floor. That made me furious, but it was at one time thing. What I hated most was when I had to sit with my supervisor and relisten to my calls and figure out what I could have done better.

90) And he kept taking me aside.

91) First of all, this was painful because I was so bad at it, but also I had to do speech therapy as a child and having to listen to my voice made me realize that I never really managed to nail the pronunciation of those words my uncles used to make fun of me for saying wrong.

92) It caused me so much pain to hear how I say Okay, like "Oh-Tay!", That I had to cut it out of my vocabulary all together and replace it with alright. But that sounded to self-conscious and UGHH! Sent shivers up my spine to hear.

93) But it wasn't just my time at the call centre that had gone bad from working this job,

94) Sometimes, when my girlfriend would rant at me about her job, I would just offer these deeply insincere call centre apologies, like "oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, but I'm here to help." And she would say "Help? I don't need your help I just want you to shut up and listen to me for once!"

95) And then also, it got into my dreams.

96) I'd wake up in the morning with calls going terribly wrong in my head.

97) I couldn't escape

98) At some point—I think maybe a month and a half in—I started making deals with myself about how long I would stay at the call centre.

99) There were two deals I would make with myself.

100) The first was that the second I got the ArtsNB grant I'd applied for (which although I deeply regretted everything I wrote in the application, I still hoped I'd get), I'd quit and become a full-time artist for as long as the grant lasted, which, given the cost of insulin wouldn't be long.

101) But of course, this was not a guarantee, so

102) The other deal I made that I would stay at the job until I got health insurance on June 1, load up on a bunch of insulin on quit.

103) After a few pay checks, even without insurance, I managed to pay off most of my credit card debt,

104) And I thought, you know what? I've got a four-thousand-dollar credit limit, and I'll have some money in the bank, that should give me at least a couple months to find a new job after I quit—even if I don't get artsnb and during that time I could just work on my book.

105) Sometimes, too, when this job got real hard to take, I would buy myself a record and say I had to work till I paid it off. When I'd been diagnosed with diabetes, I started buy a lot of records, mostly by Prince, who had just died, and at the call centre, it got to the point where I'd either be buying a record at Spin-It, on the way to work, if I really didn't want to make the drive, or I'd be finding a record on my step from amazon when I got home. I was buying so many records I didn't have time to listen to them. I still have records from this period of my life that I don't know because I just dumped shit-tons of cash into that black hole,, to keep myself at the job

106) It was just not a sustainable survival strategy.

107) Sometimes I would think about that plan I'd made about how I'd get published and think about how far off track I was, how many of the manageable steps I'd missed,

108) At times I felt like—if I stayed at the call centre—I was destined to become one of those people who plans to write that book they'd always dreamed of and eventually tells themselves they'll do it on/ce they retire, but keep getting distracted, or can't deal with the pressure of writing their first book, or dies at

sixty-five (which is a lot more likely for a diabetic), and I just found that to be such a heartbreaking image (No offense to anyone who plans to do that...).

109) After we started on the floor for real, we no longer had lunch with each other any more. We'd each be scheduled in lunch breaks based in when it would least affect the ability of the call centre to quickly process claims (this was algorithmically determined). This meant some days I would get a lunch break an hour and a half after arriving, and other days a couple hours before my shift ended.

110) And at the time, I was on fixed meals, and from what I understood from my diabetes educator, I could only eat EVERY FOUR TO SIX HOURS because that was the length of time that fast acting insulin was active for and at this point my glucometer wasn't configured in a way to give me fast acting insulin when I still had some in me.

111) As a result, sometimes I would go my whole lunch break without eating, if it fell in the first three hours of my shift, and other times would have to have to eat my whole lunch on one of my fifteen-minute breaks.

112) As a result, I spent a lot of my lunch breaks reading.

113) It was on these breaks that I really got into Just Kids.

114) And reading that book really made me question my decision to work this job.

115) I knew it was not what I wanted to be doing

116) It wasn't what I enjoyed doing,

117) In fact it was making me completely miserable,

118) And on top of that it was preventing me from doing the one thing I life that I knew would make me happy.

119) You know? Robert ant Patti were poor and miserable, they had no heat, they had a sham marriage so his parents wouldn't know he was gay and only owned two records between them, but at least they were making art!

- 120) On top of things being completely soul-crushing, everything in my life that week just seemed to be going wrong. It felt like the world was against me!
- 121) I had one call that went for twenty five minutes with this guy whose employees had all broken their phones and then he'd had the replacements shipped to them and the UPS guys dropped them off on his doorsteps and they'd all been stolen and he insisted that I stay on the line with him and do every single replacement, even though it meant that call ended up being 12 times longer than my calls were supposed to be, like how was I supposed to get my calls average down in these circumstances????
- 122) I was also pulled over on the way home, not for speeding (which I only ever did on the way there) or any other reason, but I was ticketed nonetheless for 172 dollars for not having my parent's address on my driver's license. I sat there freezing my ass off on a Thursday night for half-an-hour on the side of the road freaking out because I'd missed my nighttime insulin (which I always took at twelve thirty) no Goddamn discernible reason!
- 123) And my girlfriend had to drop me off at work one day and got lost on the way home and kept calling me to ask for directions even though it is expressly forbidden to have a phone out at the call centre,
- 124) And I got yelled at twice for testing my blood sugar because a supervisor thought it was a cell phone,
- 125) And the only thing I could draw at work was myself screaming in frustration, sometimes I'd find myself hoping I'd hit a moose just so I'd get a few days off of work....
- 126) And it got to the point where I'd call my girlfriend on every break and talk to her about the possibility of quitting, what I would do afterwards, and so on.
- 127) I finished Just Kids at lunch on my last day and I sat there in the breakroom, and it filled me with so much sadness. It was just so beautiful, such a perfect love letter to the artistic creation that I just couldn't take it anymore
- 128) And so, I walked out to my car,
- 129) Drove to Spin-It,

130) Bought every single Patti Smith album they had in stock.

a. Which was 3

131) And drove home and got straight to work on my book.

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