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The Museum Wall That Broke the Art Handler's Back

Over the summer, Hyperallergic interviewed dozens of art handlers about the variable conditions of their workplaces. This week, we are bringing their stories of accident and injury into the light.



[Zachary Small](#) [September 2, 2019](#)

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This is the first installment in a five-part feature, [The Danger Epidemic in Art Handling](#), which runs September 2–6 in honor of Labor Day.



Michael Pajón (photo for Hyperallergic by Aubrey Edwards Photography)

The gallery wall that broke Michael Pajón's body crashed into the art handler with the force of a grand piano. He remembers the precise moment when the movable partition collapsed upon him, puncturing his ribs and snapping his leg backward. Dragged from the wreckage by coworkers, he entered a state of shock as his friend Natalie McLaurin anxiously hovered above him. The 35-year-old was rushed by ambulance to the nearest hospital; in the accident, he had lost nearly two pints of blood. Pajón stayed under doctor supervision for weeks until he was finally released home with shattered bones, broken vertebrae, a partially collapsed lung, damaged arteries, blood thinners, a back brace, and a wheelchair. It would take more than a year until he fully recovered from these debilitating injuries. He thought he would never be an art handler again.

Four years later, memories of that day still haunt Pajón. In July 2015, he thought he was going to die pinned to the floor of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans. Today, he's

simply looking to regain a piece of himself that he lost that day. “It’s a bit of a struggle,” he said, “I feel like I’m still in the process of coming out the other end of things.”

Traditionally, art handlers are responsible for the transportation and installation of artworks, but museums are known to ask extra from their employees who end up taking on tasks like carpentry and exhibition prep while on the clock. A series of small requests like these can lead to disaster. It led Pajón to the 800-pound wall that landed him in a hospital gurney.

But accidents happen. What really bothered Pajón was how his employer treated him in the catastrophe’s aftermath. As he was being rushed to the hospital, Pajón says that museum administrators changed his employment status from “independent contractor” to “full-time employee.” And while the change in classification afforded him access to worker’s compensation insurance, under Louisiana law it also prevented him from suing the museum for negligence. The money insurance offered was helpful, but it didn’t cover all the expenses associated with Pajón’s hospital stay or his months of physical therapy thereafter. Unable to work and facing costly healthcare bills, he had no choice but to accrue tens of thousands of dollars in credit card debt — a sum he continues to pay off to this day. But what might have stung worse were the feelings of alienation and isolation he experienced. Four sources at the Ogden said that museum officials encouraged them to minimize contact with Pajón after the accident.

The Ogden Museum did not respond to several attempts by Hyperallergic to reach the institution by phone, email, and social media for this story.

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Over the summer, Hyperallergic interviewed dozens of art handlers about the variable conditions of their field and how the industry has changed around them in the last decade. Workers

predominantly worried that their employers were compromising health and safety standards for the sake of expediency. As public interest in the arts continues to rise, museums, galleries, and auction houses are placing higher demands on their workers than ever before. With longer hours and fewer breaks, art handlers overwhelmingly reported that injuries on the job resulted from management pressures to perform tasks quickly and often without proper machinery or training.

Accidents happen whenever manual labor is involved, yet the majority of art handlers receive no benefits, health insurance, or vacation time from their employers. That's because most of them are contracted as "permalancers," a term describing freelancers who never become full-time employees despite working for the same company over an extended period of time with set hours and working conditions. This arrangement leaves art handlers in a precarious position where they must choose between a flexible schedule and job security; however, that choice is often an illusion used to distort the reality of an art handler's usual hours.

Many art handlers that Hyperallergic spoke to reported that they regularly worked more than 60 hours per week. In extreme cases, some reported that employers asked them to work no less than 100 hours per week, including workers at Sotheby's who told Hyperallergic that failing to meet that hourly benchmark at the company would trigger disciplinary actions from management. (Sotheby's declined to comment.) Two art handlers at Phillips auction house also talked about a blacklist created with the names of people who had turned down schedules. (Phillips declined to comment.) Several workers at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum also reported that keeping lax hours would sometimes lead to their dismissal; other times, art handlers would show up to the museum scheduled to work for two weeks only for management to tell them that they weren't actually needed. (The Guggenheim declined to comment.)

The precarity of such contingent labor begs the question: Why enter this profession at all? The reality is that most art handlers

are artists themselves; most have studied art in college; and many have earned MFA degrees from prestigious graduate schools. These are people who deeply appreciate art and respect the institutions guarding it. An art handler also enters the industry because they are looking for a job that offers enough money to afford renting a studio and enough time to actually use it; instead, art handlers are finding themselves overworked, tired, and underpaid. Siloed into a career path with few opportunities for raises and promotions, the art handler can become — in a word — stuck.

Frustrated by the limitations of upward mobility in art handling, many industry veterans are exiting the art world for other professions, like teaching. Those who remain are fighting to improve working conditions. Art handlers have formed unions at several art institutions over the last decade, including at the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, MoMA PS1, Sotheby's, and Christie's. More recently, art handlers have voted to forge unions at the Guggenheim and New Museum, but workers are still waiting for official recognition from their employers. There's also an effort to create something outside the institutions. Art Handlers Alliance of New York (AHA-NY) has lobbied the industry to adopt better practices for years. Currently, the organization is working to implement a collective model based on the way Teamsters Local 814 organizes movers. The cooperative would create a pay-and-benefits structure for art handlers based on seniority funded, in part, by pooling paychecks and extracting percentages from client contracts.

Outside of these mechanisms for self-regulation, there are legal avenues workers can take to hold their employers accountable for workplace injuries. One option is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which provides federal oversight for most public and private sector employees by investigating allegations of neglect; however, art handlers rarely choose this route because few know it exists. Notably, only one worker who

shared their story with Hyperallergic actually filed a complaint with the agency, which has whistleblower protections.

But searching through OSHA's database of inspections, one can find more than 135 complaints filed against some of America's most prestigious cultural institutions in the last decade. A 2015 complaint against the Whitney Museum of American Art resulted in a \$6,500 informal settlement; another 2011 case against the Metropolitan Museum of Art cost \$20,000 in violations; and a 2017 investigation against the Boston Museum of Fine Arts revealed 11 total violations worth more than \$105,000 in damages. Unfortunately, OSHA's database seldom lists specifics of these violations, especially when the cases — like those listed above — have reached settlement.

Not all of these cases necessarily involved art handlers, but the existence of such reports nevertheless betrays the art world's overtures of self-exceptionalism. Luxury always comes at a cost. The white walls and polished floors of our greatest galleries buffer out the immense physical costs of staging culture from art history. And this industry — like all others — is subject to abuse.

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Natalie McLaurin was barely out of college when she started her career as an art handler. It was 2006. She had a degree in industrial design from Pratt Institute and a desire to work any job that existed outside an office cubicle. After a six-month stint as a toy designer, she landed at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum as an art handler. It was there that she became hooked on preparatory work because it involved problem-solving, math, and measuring. Plus, she was good at it.

Not long thereafter, she began freelancing with a variety of galleries in New York, eventually landing a contract with the Guggenheim as a member of their art preparator crew. She enjoyed her time there, describing it as collegiate and a great place to learn more about the business.

But when she moved to Louisiana in 2008 for a gig with Prospect New Orleans, a citywide contemporary art triennial, McLaurin had trouble making friends in the Big Easy. She initially found the arts community there to be surprisingly close-guarded. “I had to hang out with people long enough to convince them that I wasn’t some carpetbagger from New York.” she said. One of her first allies in the city was Michael Pajón, who helped her find another job after Prospect ended.

The triennial had lured McLaurin to New Orleans in part because it paid \$25 per hour (about the same rate as she was making at the Guggenheim) in a city with drastically lower costs of living than New York City. However, over time she noticed that rates for art handling had begun to slip in the city, typically fluctuating between \$15 and \$20 an hour. Worse, McLaurin felt that worker protections in Louisiana were subpar, allowing employers to take away important rights. “At the Guggenheim, you would get an hour for lunch and half-hour breaks in the mornings and afternoons,” she observed. “In New Orleans, you are lucky if you get an hour for anything. And most of the time, you aren’t getting paid for that break.”

There was also a profound difference in how art institutions in New Orleans legally classified their art handlers. At the Cooper Hewitt and Guggenheim, McLaurin signed W-2 contracts, classifying her as a part-time employee; however, most venues down south wanted her to sign 1099 contracts made for independent contractors. According to her, this type of worker classification was incorrect for the jobs she did. Art handlers often work for employers who set their schedules and decide pay rates, two traits that the federal government classifies as worthy of a W-2. With such an agreement, art handlers would have payroll taxes withheld by their employer and access to overtime benefits, which some speculate is precisely why institutions keep their employers on a freelance basis.

Why would anyone tolerate this type of runaround? Because the NOLA arts community is so tight-knit that the social and

economic consequences for reporting an institution could be dire, she says. For art handlers, she explains, the essential question is: “Am I going to report them and get in trouble? Then nobody will ever hire me again.”



Inside the Ogden Museum of Southern Art (image via [Ed Bierman/Flickr](#))

McLaurin was lucky to have been across the street from the Ogden Museum when the wall fell on Pajón. Entering the gallery after workers had pulled him out from under the wall, her job was to keep him awake until the paramedics arrived. The room cleared, and for a while it was just him and her, both wondering how the world had somehow turned upside down on them.

“In New Orleans, people are so desperate for work that isn’t in the hospitality industry that they will put up with anything,” McLaurin said. Relief came for her when she eventually exited the art handling business for a director position at Antenna

Gallery, an arts nonprofit focused on developing culture in the city's Upper Ninth Ward.

Having stepped away from the field that both helped her career and hurt her friend, McLaurin now sees an industry ripe for reform, and believes any kind of community organizing is progress. But for the institutions who rely on art handlers as contingent laborers, she warns that they are playing a dangerous game.

“They could lose a lot of their funding if their employees aren't treated better. You can lose government grants for illegally misrepresenting your workers and wages.”

Part of the problem, according to Pajón, is how toxic the culture of art handling can be. “We spend all this time worrying about art that our own personal safety comes last. There are jokes about falling over to catch something before it breaks, but that's unhealthy,” he said. “It means that you see yourself as a piece of furniture as opposed to a human being.”

Even with his misgivings, Pajón recently returned to art handling. His worker's compensation checks after attorney fees were just \$300 per week. The insurance may have covered his medical bills, but his monthly allowance failed to cover most of his living expenses or the lost income during his recovery. If he had another way to make income, Pajón says that he wouldn't have returned to the industry. But he still has around \$10,000 in debt, and he needs to eat.