Constantina Zavitsanos Addresses Debt and Dependency with Lasers and Holograms

By Emily Watlington

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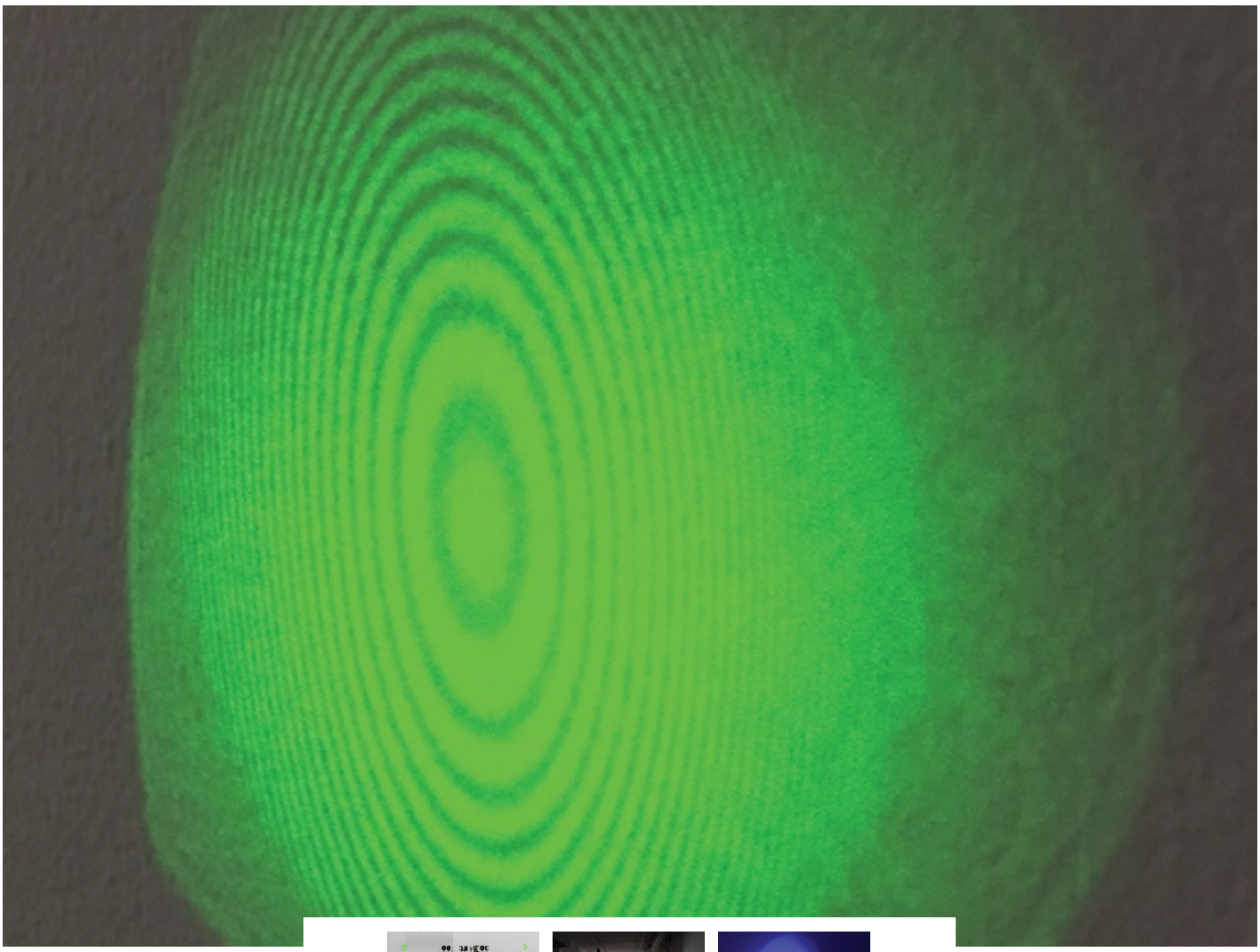

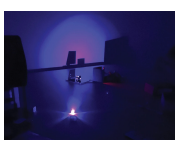

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When **Constantina Zavitsanos (https://www.artnews.com/t/constantina-zavitsanos/)** received a portion of the $18-million settlement that New York City paid

to hundreds of activists illegally arrested at a 2004 protest of the Iraq War during the Republican National Convention, the artist gave the money away. Every day for ninety-nine days in the summer of 2015, Zavitsanos left Visa cards at the **New Museum (https://www.artnews.com/t/new-museum/)**, loaded with $25, $50, $100, or $500. On Thursdays, when guards and maintenance staff were invited to use the card, Zavitsanos loaded money twice in amounts up to $1,000. The card was left on a retractable tray inserted into the museum's admission desk. The desktop is a few inches too high for wheelchair users, according to Americans with Disabilities Act regulations, so the tray was added by the New Museum's designers to make it compliant. Because the tray was typically retracted but extended for the duration of the intervention, its purpose was not obvious to most visitors. A text that Zavitsanos placed next to the card identified it as an artwork titled *Sweepstakes*, and invited visitors to spend the money as they pleased.

The transaction records Zavitsanos received showed that visitors frequently used the cards to purchase museum admission tickets. Some people bought a coffee or meal before returning the card, though they were also allowed to keep them forever, and spend until them ran out. Several visitors used the money to fill up their car's gas tank. Zavitsanos's gesture, then, not only allowed people to enter the museum at no cost but also provided for material needs like food and fuel—making no assumptions or judgments about what those needs or desires might be. Providing access to the museum and other resources by utilizing the ADA-compliant desk addition, *Sweepstakes* invited expanded reflections on accessibility.

The work was part of Zavitsanos's New Museum residency project "This Could Be Us," which included a number of public programs centered around care, disability, debt, and dependency: overarching themes of the artist's practice. On the museum's fifth floor, the Pennsylvania-born, New York–based artist displayed paperwork documenting their family's debt over 273 years. A column of white paper encased in a metal frame extended from floor to ceiling. Titled *1737/1921/2010 (It was what I wanted now)*, the work contained documents ranging from an ancestor's contract describing his penal sentence to work in the colonies (1737), to receipts for the artist's student loan payments (2010). Zavitsanos, a graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program, displayed their mountain of debt while still giving the lawsuit settlement away, prompting reflection on what it means to settle a score or make something right. We often call large amounts of debt "crippling," an ableist figure of speech that equates the inability to walk with confinement or deficiency. Zavitsanos instead gestured toward a "cripping" of debt, wherein "to crip," as used in the disability community, means to articulate disabled pride. The work celebrates dependency: to crip debt is to cast dependency not as a pit or a lack, but as a column, a support.

"Some things, when they're divided, they double," Zavitsanos told me in their studio this past July, talking not about money but the holograms of dice and other gambling

accoutrements they were making for their show "L&D Motel," opening this month at **Participant Inc (https://www.artnews.com/t/participant-inc/)**. in New York. If you cut a holographic image in half, you get two full images. "L&D Motel" encourages visitors to perceive abundance: this time in terms of light and sound. When we spoke, Zavitsanos described how the holograms are being lit in part by red lasers that bounce off mirrors, creating the effect of ambient red lighting in the space. The laser light is a fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum, which encompasses (among other things) white light and rainbow colors. But the spectrum also includes frequencies we can't see. Isolating one less commonly utilized but still visible frequency serves as a reminder of that rich range. The lurid glow also echoes red light districts, evoking the venue's history as a former sex club.

Underscoring this nightclub feel, the exhibition includes an installation of powerful custom subwoofers that can play sounds pitched too low to be heard by humans. To demonstrate this when I visited the studio, Zavitsanos played Beyoncé's "Partition"—a bass-heavy song often used to test a speaker's lower range—on regular subwoofers. The bass shook the room. "Partition" sometimes hits forty, maybe thirty hertz; the sound Zavitsanos composed is five. The artist generated the sound wearing a SubPac—a vest that plays frequencies from five to 125 hertz and allows users to feel vibrations. There's a whole range of frequencies that we don't typically utilize. Abundance surrounds us, it's just a matter of which senses we value.

Zavitsanos's sound can be felt but not heard. For this reason, it's accessible to all audiences regardless of hearing ability. There is not one version of this sound for hearing people, and another version mediated by captions for deaf/Deaf people. Likewise, the subwoofer installation takes the form of a ramp. Unlike many art spaces in the city, Participant Inc. is wheelchair accessible. But Zavitsanos would have needed to build a raised floor to house the subwoofers. Rather than construct an elevated floor that had to be ramped, the artist decided to make the work itself into a ramp situated in the back of the space, ascending toward a wall. Using "access as a primary material," as Zavitsanos put it in an interview with Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, is crucial to their practice, as well as that of their peers and collaborators like Carolyn Lazard, Park McArthur, and Jordan Lord.[1]

Access is conceived of as the fabric of, rather than an addendum to, Zavitsanos's video *Scores for Carolyn* (2019), made with McArthur and on view in "Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall" at the Brooklyn Museum through December 8. The piece features a monologue that concerns care networks and what disability justice activist Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy," which she describes as "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs."[2] The video prioritizes the needs of those encountering the work via closed captions rather than audio. The audio is slowed, though still decipherable; caption reading is primary. There are never characters onscreen with whom to match dialogue.

Zavitsanos's work is a materialist celebration of dependency that emphasizes the omnipresence of entanglement at the level of particles. A science-turned-art major, the artist uses scientific instruments to render quantum entanglement visible. In so doing, they demonstrate that entanglement and dependency are not anomalies or signs of weakness, but are actually the basis of the physical world. The famous 1927 Double Slit Experiment, for example, is illustrated in *A Composition of Waters* (2018), a video that Zavitsanos made with Amalle Dublon. This experiment—which became the basis for the field of quantum physics, or the study of nature at the scale of atoms and subatomic particles—radically complicated what we thought we knew about the autonomy of individual particles. "Quantum entanglement refers to pairs or groups of particles for which the properties of each cannot be described independently of the others," write Zavitsanos and Dublon in an essay that accompanied their work at Artists Space in spring 2018. "Even when they are really far away from one another, these particles must be apprehended as a system."[3] Efforts by scientists to investigate how this quantum entanglement works have proven extremely difficult, because particles behave differently when being watched. Observation itself is entangled. *A Composition of Waters* (2018) simulates an interference pattern created by the Double Slit Experiment, wherein a single particle, or a beam of light, is sent through a barrier punctured with two slits. The particle divides and becomes a wave, then interferes with itself to create a rather beautiful pattern. ("Some things, when they're divided, they double.")

A similar principle is illustrated by Zavitsanos and Dublon's *Interferometer (Quantum Eraser)*, 2018, wherein lasers, lenses, beamsplitters, mirrors, and polarizers are precisely arranged to produce interference patterns that look something like a green thumbprint projected on the wall. By using right angles and mirrors, the artists show the physics of complementarity and superposition. You don't have to fully grasp the technicalities of these concepts to understand that, when the light beams interfere, they are split and produce a new shape. Interference patterns are also responsible for holographic effects. We often think of interference and splitting in the negative: as a cacophony, an occlusion, a downright wreck. Zavitsanos invites us to view this phenomenon as full of latent possibility.

This turn to particles and waves is not an esoteric gesture distant from political reality. Instead, Zavitsanos's installations of scientific instruments are metonyms for the abundance of resources that surround us. Re-creating experiments in the gallery, the artist undermines the notion that anything is autonomous, highlighting the impossibility of an even exchange. "People think we don't have enough to go around, but their solution is: 'let's give rich white people everything,'" Zavitsanos exclaimed to me in the studio. "That should be all-out war!" Maybe so: after all, in the United States there are more empty homes than homeless people and thirty to forty percent of the food we produce goes to waste while people go hungry. The country's total collective debt hit $4

trillion in 2018, while that same year, the richest 10% owned 70% of America's assets at nearly twenty times that deficit: $79.8 trillion. There's an excess of money, of time, of food, but it's distributed all wrong, so we think there's a shortage, that we have to protect what's ours. The need to perceive abundance couldn't be more urgent. Zavitsanos invites us to change our framework and see that there's plenty to go around, casting dependence, debt, and entanglement as natural, omnipresent, and rich.

This article appears under the title "Abundance and Interference" in the September 2019 issue, pp. 74–77.

Endnotes

1. Constantina Zavitsanos, "Giving It Away: Constantina Zavitsanos on Disability, Debt, Dependency," interview by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, Art Papers, Jan.9, 2019, artpapers.org.

2. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," Leaving Evidence, May 5, 2011, leavingevidence.wordpress.com.

3. Constantina Zavitsanos and Amalle Dublon, "Nothing, Something, Everything, Anything," exhib. brochure for Coop Fund, Amalle Dublon and Constantina Zavitsanos, Devin Kenny, John Neff: Artists Space Exhibitions, constantinazavitsanos.com.