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In the commercial exchanges that govern our daily lives, there are no free lunches. Yet in the ceremonial world of art, some projects are presented as such. Cliff Eyland has given away thousands of three-by-five-inch drawings, handed out or placed between pages of library books. Montreal-based Mindy Yan Miller and Marcus Miller have provided a free repair service for household goods, adopting a Russian-constructivist image of a seamstress as their symbol. Much of Rirkrit Tiravanija's practice has involved providing free meals and social activity for his audiences, while Minerva Cuevas, under the umbrella of her one-woman Mejor Vida Corp., supplies citizens with free products and services for the betterment of daily life — and the downfall of corporate and government interests.

These and other projects speak a language of generosity, but looking more closely at their unspoken conditions, we might notice strings, particularly of conscience, attached. To consider what these obligations might be, it is worth looking more generally at practices of gift-giving — at the anatomy of the gift horse, so to speak. I do not mean partaking in the branch of consumer research that simply focuses on psychologies of gift selection and presentation, wilfully ignoring the ethical and political dimensions of gift-giving (a typical formula, for instance, defines the "perfect gift" as representing Sacrifice, Altruism, Luxury, Appropriateness, Surprise, and Delight). Rather, we should look to the many social scientists who consider the

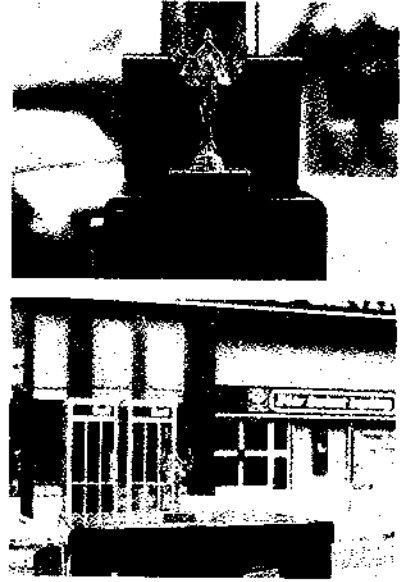
repercussions of giving in contemporary culture. For them, Marcel Mauss's 1925 study of ceremonial exchange, such as potlatch in archaic societies, remains the crucial starting point.⁷ Mauss first articulated the view that, in a total system of exchange, giving is just one point in a triad of obligations that include reception and reciprocation. He noted that gift-giving is always both free and obligatory, disinterested and self-interested, and implies some expectation of return.

In an essay on "littoralist" art projects conceived as communicative action, Bruce Barber identifies a number of conditions that commonly underlie the gift. As Mauss noted, giving is never a neutral or free activity,⁸ but always includes expectations of both giver and recipient. Cynically viewed, selfless altruism (arising from ethical consideration for others) and philanthropy may not exist, as there are always benefits of self-esteem and respect which accrue to the giver. Barber also notes how disparate value systems have understood the gift. In Christian giving the offering is a sort of atonement for, or expiation of, sin. In Marxist terms, philanthropy reinforces the moral superiority and existing social status of those with the power to give. However, the gift can also be subsumed by socialism as a politically acceptable form for equalizing need and excess.⁹

Theorists following Mauss continue to face the problem of reconciling the simultaneous yet apparently contradictory notions of obligation and spontaneity, and of altruism and egoism, in giving. Some claim that even in modern soci-

previous pages**Cliff Eycland***Untitled 2001, from the File Card Works*
ongoing since 1981**below left****Kim Adams***The Gift Machine 1988*
photo: Cheryl O'Brien**below right and bottom****Christy Thompson***Good for You, 1998*

Toronto installation: 100 trophies



eties the gift and counter-gift are more important means of circulating goods and services than are either market-based buying and selling or state-controlled redistribution of wealth through taxes and public services.⁹ Many contemporary art projects which take the form of gifts do attempt to advance the conceptualization of giving as a realm of exchange distinct from mercantile or social-service models, or to critique these through example. However, in practice many of these end up conforming to one of the other models, implying either that it is difficult to maintain gift-giving as an independent form of exchange, or that the ceremony of gift-giving is susceptible to being co-opted as an ideological tool, for both capitalist and social-liberal interests.

New York artist Stephen Ellwood and Vancouver's Adbusters organization have also staged money give aways, both involving money raining from the sky — that mythical source of free goods. As one of its campaigns to disrupt consumer behaviour, for April Fool's Day, 2001 Adbusters encouraged its readers to shower money onto the floors of shopping malls in order to catalyze self-criticism on the part of both the money-grubbing recipients and a second audience of media watchers, claiming that "throwing money at the problem works — when the problem is conformity!"¹⁰ As described by Bruce Barber, Ellwood advertised that at a specified hour he would pour money (some \$300 in nickels) from a downtown Halifax rooftop (he was a NSCAD student at the time), drawing both an audience of potential recipients and a media scrum. The event tacitly counted on a socially conditioned feeling that the redistrib-

ution of money is somehow shameful or unseemly. When Ellwood distributed the coins before the announced time, he may have frustrated the media's hope of witnessing the "undignified" act. In so doing, he may have succeeded in raising questions about whose interests are imperilled by acts of giving: who is threatened by redistribution of wealth, symbolic or otherwise?

While the Adbusters project functions as a conceptual critique, using the money as a gimmick in an agit-prop campaign without seriously proposing the gift as a means to bring down capitalism, Surasi Kusolwong's *Free For All* project presents the gift as an alternative to commercial exchange. Kusolwong knowingly short-circuits a mercantile system by having participants fish out of a large pen a variety of goods and trinkets from Thai marketplaces. He cannily pits a systemic disdain for cheap goods against individuals' acquisitive urges, recreating in the small arena an uncomfortable illustration of colonialist trade, with privileged art-tourists ravaging an exotic bounty. Yet he also turns these devalued goods into social capital for creating community and play, providing the means to imagine an economy of exchange that has little to do with commerce and much more to do with convivial feelings. This element of unselfish play also fuelled Toronto-based Kim Adams's *Gift Machine* (1988), a sculptural assemblage of consumer objects used as a kiosk for distributing fancifully useless tennis balls on sticks. The "machine" — really a human operator — distributed the treats through a principle of displacement, with participants setting into motion a compli-

John Marriott
What's Between Us 2001
 photo: courtesy the artist



cated ritual from which they did not benefit. This process effectively disrupted the standard selfish assumption of audiences that it is their unique role to take and be pleased. Instead, their unrequited act produced a free gift for someone else.

It seems no accident that amongst the artists investigating nonmarket systems many operate in areas with already weak markets. (Kusolwong and Tiravanija are Thai, and Cuevas Mexican, while Eyland addresses the art market from Canada, which barely has one.) If we were to accept

the Maussian assumption that gift-giving is a form of social trade which has largely been superseded by modern markets and legislated welfare, these attempts to establish alternatives to market systems would have to be viewed as anachronistic, or explained as some kind of archaic holdover specific to disadvantaged societies. However, it seems equally viable to suggest that the recent interest in the gift signals the exhaustion of modern market models. Vancouver-based Ron Terada's *Soundtrack For An Exhibition* (2000) is a compilation of songs borrowed from recent electronic pop albums. The only physical element of a silent

installation consisting of projected credits for the tunes, the souvenir CD participates in the current undermining of markets by the free circulation of information via uncensored services such as Napster. Without specifically making a case against copyright, Terada nonetheless gives away that which is not legally his to give, in a move that bespeaks a love of that which is being given. Terence Dick discusses the impulses invested in the gift of the compilation tape/CD. Distinguishing itself from mass-produced commodities, it is "fraught with added layers of meaning. It is a personal creation that communicates some inner logic, describes an aesthetic through assemblage, and aims to recreate an experience, to manipulate the emotions of listeners according to the desires of the compiler."⁶ In other words, its search of self-statement incidentally requires its maker to bypass market rules. Terada's copyright-infringing gift brings to mind other current battles over ownership of information, indirectly allying itself with, for example, the open-source computer code movement's promotion of the non proprietary free exchange of knowledge.

Specifically applying these questions to the trade in cultural artefacts, Cliff Eyland's file-card drawings upset the commodity status of art by pointing to the fact that art-mar-

ket values are symbolically established, in large part by the very structures through which art objects circulate. Although they constitute in themselves a logically complete project distributed through means appropriate to their format, his free file-card drawings might still be viewed as "teasers" or "loss-leaders" for his comparatively higher-ticket paintings and sculptures, which conform to the same three-by-five size but which, sitting higher in the hierarchy of media, are sold by art dealers. As he potentially undermines the value of his art by giving significant portions of it away, Eyland also poses a challenge to established pricing systems, and opens interesting questions about how social esteem is related to donation: an artist giving his work away may appear to devalue it, while a third party making a donation would gain social status.⁷

The practice of "charitable donation" of capital and cultural property to institutions is a particularly rule-bound ceremonial process trading tax shelters for so-called philanthropy, for which the verb "to gift" has been invented. It is one case in which the personal prestige and economic benefits of giving may outweigh the value of the object presented, and one of the ways in which capitalist interests borrow the altruistic rhetoric of giving. In our fundamentally commercial world, we assume that most give aways conceal self-interest, if not aggressive intent, within their apparent generosity, as in publicity-driven freebies which ultimately serve as self-promotion, or tracts which, in the guise of public service, serve to push their authors' opinions on a

public. Playing on the contradictory push and promise of marketing, in 1998 Christy Thompson placed 100 small trophies engraved with the words "Good For You" throughout downtown Toronto. Ambiguously offering some unknown benefit and/or praising an unspecified feat, the trophies were available for the taking, but may have given viewers pause to think through their suspicions of "free" gifts. Thompson's project ends up reflecting some of the insecurities that capitalism feeds on, such as a wariness of the intentions behind give aways (a fact that is underscored by the reassurance consumers take in the supposed superiority of brand-name goods and the "honest" simplicity of commercial transactions).

The internal debate facing Thompson's audience is similar to that which may arise in Rirkrit Tiravanija's and John Marriott's work respectively, though the latter are more convivial. Tiravanija's projects don't "work" without participants; the point is less the content of his offerings than the ambiance and social space that are created when one accepts the invitation to partake. What his audience brings to the table, so to speak, is a willingness to engage in social relations. Rather than being a one-sided gesture on the part of the artist, there is also an element of good faith

that participants contribute to the exchange. Toronto-based John Marriott creates participatory situations that are fulfilling not only because a service is rendered but because it is also unexpected. In one instance he left in public spaces items with lingering value — a watch, a houseplant — free for the taking. Via the inscription "When this _____ ceases, what's between us is gone", he identified these gifts as tokens of a relationship established between donor and recipient. In *After You* (1998), he stood in lineups at bank machines and other locations, waiting to give his spot to someone else, along with a card explaining the will-to-please behind this gesture. His practice promotes goodwill through calculated acts of kindness. Tiravanija and Marriott succeed in creating giving situations independent of both commerce and immediate political intent, in which the obligations of the receivers are simply to reciprocate by being socially engaged, and perhaps by in turn "paying forward" the gesture they have enjoyed. In other words, although the political motivation is not obvious, there is a low-key incitement to social action.

While these projects view social interaction as a valuable end in itself, others hold exchange as socially instrumental. Minerva Cuevas's anticorporate Mejor Vida Corp. (Better Life Corp., founded 1998, <www.irational.org/mvc>) gives away stamped envelopes, Mexico-City subway and lottery tickets, student cards, typing and protection services, and more! Like Tiravanija's and Marriott's interactions, these products and services are proffered for a better quality of

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life, but contain seriously subversive intent. Her removing the commercial element from these exchanges can be seen as a symbolic act of usurping the power built into these official instruments and returning it to the people. Cuevas's give aways represent a social contract that encourages responsibility for social activism and informed citizenship on the part of the recipient.

Other free offers contain a more contemplative form of social expectation. When Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres heaped piles of candies or placed "endless" stacks of printed posters for the taking, he was essentially tendering a sense of vulnerability. Implicated in his offers was always a quiet urging to the audience to be gentle, to savour the moment — a message too often lost on the rapacious souvenir collectors who swarm his work (perhaps now that the artist has died of AIDS that voice is heard a little more clearly). Gonzalez-Torres's work brilliantly condensed the hopefulness involved in offering oneself unilaterally. It could be said that the very act of presenting artwork for public consumption always constitutes an act of generosity, an action of putting oneself on the line with no expectation of a response (or at least no way of predicting what that will be), save for the intangible hope of glory. Significantly though, Gonzalez-Torres made this emotional investment the tangible crux of his give aways. Working from the reception end of the gift transaction, Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree for Detroit* (2000) may also be a true example of generosity. "Whisper your wish to the bark of the tree", it offers. It receives, no questions asked, and by absorbing rather than pushing, it gives more than any gift; its silence offers respite from the expectation of return. In Ono's tree and Gonzalez-Torres's work there is a kind of martyrdom, an element of self-sacrifice or even public service. These are models that understand art as a gift and in turn as a socially enriching gesture. Although quite unlike

Cuevas's openly engaged work or the Millers' utilitarian *Mending Booth* (1994/1997), they also present giving as a form of social duty.

The projects discussed all assume, tacitly or overtly, the obligatory nature of the gift. In each, the action of giving requires of the recipient a consideration of the gift's values (its intentions), in order to evaluate whether and how to respond. Maybe the current proliferation of gift-giving is a variation on the now-commonplace emphasis on interactivity in art (i.e., not only speaking and receiving, but also responding), but in these projects the emphasis is not solely on the fact of interaction. There is almost always another social expectation, and this is often a humanist invitation to act for the betterment of a community. These projects borrow the language of gift-giving to symbolize rejection of a commercial model of exchange and/or alliance with a principle of social equalization. Thus in these examples at least, the realm of gift-giving is not seen as independent of questions of commerce or community welfare but intricately tied up with both of them. Just as no single gift is free, in these art projects the rhetorical use of the practice of giving also always has ulterior motives.

Germaine Koh is a visual artist, independent curator, and member of MIX's board. She has also been known to give things away.

Notes

1 Russell W. Bolk, "The Perfect Gift" in Cele Otnes and Richard F. Beltrami, eds., *Gift Giving: A Research Anthology* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), pp. 59–84.

2 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990), trans. W.D. Halls. First published as *Essai sur le Don* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

3 Bruce Barber, "Littoralist Art Practice and Communicative Action," 1996, <<http://www.banff-centre.ab.ca/WPG/nmsc/squat/giving.art.htm>>
"Littoral describes the intermediate and shifting zone between the sea and the land and refers metaphorically to cultural projects that are undertaken predominantly outside of the conventional contexts of the institutionalized artworld" — Bruce Barber, "Sentences on Littoral Art" <<http://a-r-c.gold.ac.uk/ref/texts/littoral.html>>

4 Alain Caillé, preface to Jacques T. Godbout, *The World of the Gift* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), p. vii.

5 Documented at <<http://adbusters.org/campaigns/foolsfest/>>

6 Terence Dick, "Pop Art: Tunesmithing in the Work of Ron Terada and Rodney Graham", *MIX*, vol. 27, no. 1, Summer 2001, p. 34.

7 See the artist's own discussion of the issues in Cliff Elyand, "Mixed Funding, Mixed Markets. Little Pictures" in Sally McKay and Andrew J. Paterson, eds., *Money Value Art: State Funding, Free Markets, Big Pictures* (Toronto: YYY Books, 2001), pp. 21–3.