

Exchanged

by

Carolyn Mount

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ART

School of Art

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Copyright © 2015 by Carolyn Mount

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to those that have supported me throughout this journey and process. In particular, to Donna Jones for her administrative coordination and to the amazing technicians, Dan Dell'Agnese, Chris Pancoe, Trevor Baziuk and Franc Ferdinand for their technical support and guidance. Thank you to the gallery technicians for the installation support. I would like to extend a warm thanks to my committee for their direction and patience with me, and to my wife Christine for her tireless work and effort to make this happen. To my fellow students, it has been an honour to share this journey with you. And I would sincerely like to thank every individual that supported my research through his or her interest and participation.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
THEORETICAL RESEARCH	4
PERSONAL RESEARCH	7
THE UNSUCCESSFUL ASSETS EXCHANGE.....	14
THE EXHIBITION	16
THE DEBT PROJECT BLOG	18
CONCLUDING STATEMENT	19
WORKS CITED.....	21

Research Statement:

By incorporating a material practice within an approach that is socially engaged, my research examines if and how community can be built and developed through the use of alternative economies. Through public participation, I am questioning if the act of collaboration can alter one's relationship with and understanding of art and maker.

Introduction

Gift economies have been around for thousands of years. Once considered a primitive economic system (Hyde 110), they are now seen as and celebrated for having merits worth considering as an alternative to our capitalist market economy. As stated above, my research explores how the use of gift economies can alter and/or build community. Beyond this, how does gifting or trading my artwork affect others and their understanding of art, as well as my understanding of myself and my practice? In other words, what happens when I give my artwork away? To answer this, I will first provide a brief framework for gift economies: their history, their role in contemporary society, and the role of the artist. I will then share results from my personal research as it relates to my ongoing *Trade Project* and my final thesis exhibition 'Exchanged'.

Theoretical Research

Cultural research related to gift economies was most thoroughly examined by Marcel Mauss in the early part of the 20th century. The key premise to his

research was that gifts create feeling-bonds between people. Commodities do not. In fact, many would argue that one of the greatest assets of the market economy is that there is no expectation or presumption for connection (Purves 54). One cultural focus of Mauss's research was on the Maori people of the Pacific Rim. In Maori culture, each gift possesses a spirit, the *hau*. When a gift is given, the *hau* demands that the gift be reciprocated. It holds a spiritual, legal and moral hold over the person. It is this tie between giver and receiver that unites two souls, for the gift itself is considered to have a soul (McIlveen 33,34). Counter this with the market economy. The commodity is standard. It is not unique. There is no tie for there is no personal exchange. One buys a commodity from a system. One among the many, from the many. For gifts, there is one for the other. According to Ted Purves, writer and editor of *What We Want is Free*, "When we receive the gift, we must automatically consider the giver of the gift, the person behind the token. If we accept the gift and do not do this, then a diminishment of the spirit, both our own and that of the community to which we are attached, occurs." (53, 54)

Gift economies are essential today more than ever. The social nature of the Western or developed world has become more fragmented, isolating and individualistic, in spite of, or perhaps because of, developing technologies and systems of connection like the internet. (re:publica 2015 - Zygmunt Bauman) We are bombarded by bigger, better and brighter choices in our capitalist economy. Yet we are more and more distanced from those that provide the goods and resources we seek. As social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai states, "gift giving in highly commoditized societies... exemplifies a fundamental problem: how to create

human relations in a world where all things are potentially in the market or on the market.” (Hudek 23) Or, as Lewis Hyde most powerfully states in *The Gift*:

In the present century the opposition between negative and positive reciprocity has taken the form of a debate between "capitalist" and "communist", "individualist" and "socialist"; but the conflict is much older than that, because it is an essential polarity between the part and the whole, the one and the many. Every age must find its balance between the two, and in every age the domination of either one will bring with it the call for its opposite. For where, on the one hand, there is no way to assert identity against the mass, and no opportunity for private gain, we lose the well-advertised benefits of a market society--its particular freedoms, its particular kind of innovation, its individual and material variety, and so on. But where, on the other hand, the market alone rules, and particularly where its benefits derive from the conversion of gift property to commodities, the fruits of the gift exchange are lost. At that point, commerce becomes correctly associated with the fragmentation of community and the suppression of liveliness, fertility, and social feeling. For where we maintain no institutions of positive reciprocity, we find ourselves unable to participate in those "wider spirits" ...unable to enter gracefully into nature, unable to draw community out of the mass, and finally, unable to receive, contribute toward, and pass along the collective treasures we refer to as a culture and tradition. Only when the increase of gifts moves with the gift may the accumulated wealth of our spirit continue to grow among us, so that each of us may enter, and be revived by, a vitality beyond his or her solitary powers. (49, 50)

I recognize that our contemporary, Western society cannot exist or function solely as an alternative economy. As stated above, there are benefits to a capitalist market that function to serve and support our world as it is. Yet I do believe there are limitations to this system and that alternative economies offer a different way of acquiring goods and services while supporting and building community. I am not saying one system is better than the other. Rather, we can function outside of a

binary relationship (one or the other) and that as we explore alternatives, our understanding of self and other expands.

So where does the artist fit into the alternative economic system? What role does the artist play? Nicolas Bourriaud speaks to this in his seminal text, *Relational Aesthetics*. Using the term social *interstice*, originally coined by Karl Marx to describe alternative economies outside of the capital economy, Bourriaud uses the term to describe artworks that fit within a larger structure yet create space for exchanges that diverge from the expected (16). Artists have the capacity to engage and make connections with and between people in unique and powerful ways. Claire Bishop states there are three key motivations for making a work of an interstitial nature. The first is to create an active subject, “one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation.” Secondly, a sense of authorship is evoked or challenged as the artist relinquishes some or all of the creative power and invites the viewer into a more democratic relationship. Bishop continues, “Collaborative creativity is therefore understood to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social mode”. The third impetus for participatory work is to salvage and remedy the torn social fabric of our capitalistic system (12). It is with such reasoning and intention that I engaged my audience in my on-going *Trade Project*.

Personal Research

At this point I should clarify the framework from which I have chosen to work. I have committed to gifting or trading all the work I make for a period of one

year. Though the *Trade Project* involves trading, I consider it more an act of gifting over bartering. As I am letting my audience set the price for the exchange, there is no negotiation or haggling as would be found in a bartering arrangement. Though I receive something in return, there is no expectation on my part for what is “fair”. And though I have set up the parameters for a relationship where exchange is welcomed, I am not limited to this. Should a return to my gift not be made, I still offered my artwork. In fact, there were trades that were offered on my part yet failed to return an exchange. Whatever the outcome, I offer myself and my work. I willingly put myself in the other’s debt. As Jacques Godbout states in *The World of the Gift*:

...the giver of a gift does not aim at the reduction of uncertainty. On the contrary, givers create a permanent zone of uncertainty that applies to themselves. Donors do not first and foremost desire a return; they want the return to be free, and therefore uncertain. The gift is the stage on which the freest social bond is played out. Fundamental social cohesion is founded on this exchange....The more an act is experienced as unreserved by the two partners, the more it is unimposed, the more it reinforces the social bond once it is carried out. (189)

Through respect for my audience, I create space for my audience to return the gift with freedom and spontaneity of expression.

This freedom has resulted in a variety of different expressions and objects. Most notably are a few recurring approaches to the trades that I have noticed through trading events at different locales. The first was the “investment trade”. While situated at a local flea market, I had a number of different exchanges where my partner in trade expressed that the trade was an investment for them. Going to

the lengths of even asking for my full name (they could not decipher my name from my signature) and for me to date the print, the additional information would be used for provenance should I rise in stature and reputation as an artist in the future.

Another approach has been the “I’m cleaning out junk, what can I get rid of?” trade. A number of people clearly stated that this was their intention for the trade. Though they were free to choose whatever print they desired, the return gift was chosen in advance. The trade seemed to facilitate for them an opportunity to pass something on that was no longer of use or value to them more than a response to the gift of the image chosen in particular.

A third approach, and perhaps the most common, was the “art-for-art” trade. Being situated in a close-knit arts community, my project has been supported by a number of artists, all at different points in their careers, from students to well-established artists and professionals. A number of participants commented that this type of trade seemed most “fair”. Though I placed no expectations, parameters or made no judgement calls on what would be “fair”, most people seemed comfortable placing that framework on themselves. In fact, it was as if they needed that framework to be able to enter the relationship.

One unique group of participants were four to five children from the ages of four through ten that I had the pleasure of interacting with at a local market held at a community centre. The first interaction began with an older girl who seemed genuinely interested in the artwork. I expressed my appreciation at her interest and invited her to make a trade if she wanted to. She left and returned shortly with a ‘Free Hug’ coupon available from one of the staff at the community centre. We

agreed on a trade and I received my hug and she took her print. I was promptly presented with four more hug coupons from four more children. What was most interesting for me was that what began with a unique experience for one child evolved (or perhaps devolved?) into a competition between peers. The other interesting aspect was that each child took the largest print available. It was less about image or personal preference than what seemed to be the way to get the best deal or value for their trade compared to what their neighbour had.

The last group of trade participants that I would like to discuss here are those that seemed engaged with the project on a deeper level. Within this group were a number of different responses that had a deep impact on me. While trading on the university campus, I had a number of trades that were extremely personal for my trade partner and that in turn evoked a personal response for me. One woman was so touched by some of the images that she went home, wrote four poems about four of the prints, and traded the poems for one of the prints. Another student did not have anything on himself to trade so he wrote me a very personal letter sharing some of his life experiences, including being a closeted gay person, and proceeded to share a song with me that he had recently written. Another music student wanted to compose a piece of music and share that with me for the print he took. In each of these instances, my partner in trade gave something of themselves, a sharing of their own gifts. Here, as Lewis Hyde writes, “gifts do not bring us attachment unless they move us. Manners or social pressure may oblige us to those for whom we feel no true affection, but neither obligation nor civility leads to lasting union. It is when someone's gift stirs us that we are brought close, and what moves us, beyond the gift

itself, is the promise (or the fact) of transformation, friendship and love.” (89)

Though I cannot speak for another, I believe both parties of the trade have been changed, altered and are connected in new ways. I know I have been changed.

Here I should mention something about the work being traded. I created a series of abstract drawings that represented our social systems of connections and interactions. Having never worked abstractly before (which was actually the scariest part of the whole project for me), I consider the images an intuitive sort of social map making. Each image was then translated into a silkscreen print for which there were five of the same image to trade. That these social maps would then become an avenue for making new social connections through the act of trading added another layer to the imagery and project. I intentionally chose public spaces in my trading venues as to provide alternative environments to the art gallery (though I did include a gallery as one trading venue). I traded the works in public spaces like flea markets and community markets as a means of breaking down the imagined or real social boundaries a gallery context can present to a wider audience.

As the gallery or exhibition space can often be an intimidating or uninviting space to many, I intentionally placed myself in public places of exchange so that my work could be seen and perhaps traded for by a different demographic than those who might see it in a gallery. I rented or reserved a table at two Winnipeg flea markets over a period of three weekends (two days each) as well as a weekday community market for a period of two days (two weeks apart) over the course of four months. An exhibition of the prints was also shown at the student gallery on campus at the University of Manitoba and three additional trading days were held

over the course of a week. Though works were posted on-line on public market sites such as Kijiji, no trades were facilitated this way. However, social media did play a strong role in advertising the project and scheduled trading days. A few trades were even negotiated solely over social media with friends living outside the Winnipeg area. In total, 120 trades were made. What was not documented was the number of conversations that were had about the project. I estimate that for every trade made, there were one to two conversations about the project that did not yield a trade.

What was particularly interesting for me was the role the titles of the works played in the exchange process. An inordinately high number of people commented on the titles I had given each individual image, and many selected the image they wanted to trade solely by the title. It was also personally interesting for me that of both gestural, loose line drawings and more structured, geometric drawings, the loose ones were far more popular. What was also significant for me was that only one person asked if there was something I needed that they could provide me with through the trading process.

For me, each object from each trade represents a conversation, a connection, a person to whom I was not connected before and now am, or an existing connection that has been strengthened. The objects are for me talismans evoking a face and memory. These are individuals to me. I cannot describe anything about the person I paid for my groceries last week, but I can tell you something about the individual that gave me handknit socks, or moonshine, or a poem. Jacques Godbout says it most eloquently here:

With the gift, something else emerges, a grace that we badly need. Each modern gift offered to a recipient serves to individualize that person *from* society and not, like the archaic gift, to reinforce his individuation *within* society. Cut off from a system that encompasses the universe and regimented into systems where we are not unique but are multiples of each other, endlessly interchangeable clones, the only way we can forge a uniqueness for ourselves socially is to become part of a network of other unique people. The network is put together by unique individuals, and the gift plots out and maintains the trajectories, the paths, that link these unique individuals. (145, 146)

I am linked to unique individuals through each exchange.

I embarked on this trade project as a way and means to build community. Though I am an object maker, working in the isolation of the studio left me desirous of further opportunities to establish and develop social experiences and connections. Yet, what was unexpected was what I learned about myself through the process and what I received through the act of giving.

I have been humbled by how my work has been received and supported. In no way could I have sold as many works as I have traded over the last six to seven months. And I have learned the joy of being welcoming and gracious with all that I encounter. Yet with each connection and exchange, my ego is rewarded. I stumble between the two responses. Each trade represents a connection, yet I am hungry for more. I question why more friends or family members have not been interested in making a trade. At what point is the project successful? Is it based on a number? Would one or two quality interactions and exchanges make for a successful project? When will my ego be satisfied? Yet what remains, what lingers, is the realization

that I have shared, and that it has been received. In return, I have received from others an act, a gift, of their own.

Finally, and unexpectedly, the return is also contained in the act of giving itself, in the artist's inspiration, the personal transformation experienced by donors.... There is an immediate return of energy for the giver, who is enriched...This return, non-existent in other forms of circulation, is part and parcel of the act of giving. There is no name for this phenomenon in the social sciences...Sometimes its effect is stunning: "I'm no longer the same person," the donor will say. This return does not enter into any equation that measures equivalence, since it is contained in the act of giving, which in any ledger, is on the debit side. (Godbout 94)

The Unsuccessful Assets Exchange

One aspect of my research, which I have yet to discuss, is the unsuccessful *Assets Exchange*. I envisioned the *Assets Exchange* to be a network or community where individuals could share or receive support, resources or tools. I had grand ideas of facilitating new social bonds and connections with individuals across socio-economic boundaries as I believe we all have gifts and assets, no matter our socio-economic status or position. I initially imagined working with more than one of the social organizations that support the individuals and neighbourhood of West Broadway, a very diverse economic region of Winnipeg. However, after initial visits and time spent with the clients and patrons of the support organizations, I felt it would be disrespectful to plant myself in their midst presuming I could offer them something without first learning from them. Due to time constraints, I decided to limit my time and focus to a community I was already involved in and committed to.

Working within my faith community, I set about building a system of support for those that might have something to offer (child care help, resume building skills, the ability to cook or bake for another, a chainsaw to share, etc.) as well as those in need of that support or resource. I created an information sheet with suggestions for things to sign-up with, a sign-up sheet and I made regular announcements to the congregation. I also made myself available for questions or comments on a weekly basis for a period of six to eight weeks. Though many people expressed interest in the project, I only had five people sign-up with something to offer, and no one to connect them with as no one expressed needs or desire for support or resources.

After eight weeks of limited engagement, I decided to suspend the project for the current time. Though I know similar projects have been successful in other communities, it seemed to me that this was not the time or place for this project. Upon reflection and feedback from others, it seemed that there were a few factors that contributed to its demise. One was the nature of busyness. People expressed that they felt too overburdened in their daily routines with established commitments that they did not feel they could pledge to another undertaking. A second factor was that people confessed to feeling at a loss as to what they could offer. Acknowledging our gifts and skills can be seen as proud or arrogant (at least within this community) and people were reticent to put themselves out there in that way. In conjunction with this was the expressed feeling that it is even harder to acknowledge a need or limitation. Being vulnerable is challenging in any context, but I find it slightly ironic that it would be so difficult in a community who's faith is based on the stated belief that they are a body and no one part of the body can do

without another part. Though the project was unsuccessful, I believe the effort and experience was an important part of my research.

The Exhibition

The aforementioned research will culminate in my thesis exhibition 'Exchanged'. The foundation of the exhibition lies with the *Trade Project*. Creating a site-specific installation, the *Trade Project* will be installed in a series of previously existing custom made shelves located in the foyer of the School of Art Gallery. Through the planning stages, I had struggled with the best installation plan for the trade project. Though the work could function in a traditional gallery context, I desired to present the work in an untraditional way. As I have created a conversation around alternatives to our market economy, I wanted to play with the concept of display and commercialism as it relates to the gallery. The shelves in the foyer presented the perfect option. Located just outside the main exhibition space, the shelves function as a cataloguing system, but could also serve the purpose of a "gift" shop, often found adjacent to contemporary exhibitions in public galleries. Each shelf will hold the Artist Proof for each print edition along with the objects, or gifts, received in trade. Here the viewer will be able to see the collection of images and the 120 accompanying trades that were made.

Though the Trade Project seemed to work perfectly in its chosen location, I was not satisfied with the show culminating in that work alone. It felt that I had not yet adequately expressed the personal and emotional nature the exchanges had on

me. I do feel as I have been *changed*. I embarked on creating two new works in response to the responses I had to the *Trade Project*.

Though I considered the *Trade Project* to involve gifting on my part, as I embarked on writing thank you notes to each person that traded with me, I felt that what I received in return for the trade was in fact a gift as well. Thus, I felt the need to express my thanks. The gifting was not merely one-sided. I had entered into a relationship with each individual, almost a social contract, where the other now had a piece of me, and I had something of them. I needed to express my thanks, not only for what they traded, but more, for sharing of themselves. Some may look at some of the objects I received in trade, such as a lighter, or three marbles, and think ‘what kind of gift is that?’. Yet for me, in trying to see each individual for where they were at, some of those gifts are even more significant for I know my partner in trade offered fully what they had.

As I wrote nearly 100 thank you notes, the thought that kept recurring was that each individual had gone out of their way or diverged from the path they were on, to stop, see me, see my artwork, and offer something in exchange. In fact, for every trade that I made, there were even more conversations that were had that did not result in a trade. Yet for those that did trade, the spirit of the gift, the *hau*, was the gift. Though each object holds a personal connection and story, the spirit of the gift is what I wanted to acknowledge and offer thanks for. Though I could have referenced the specific object of the trade in the thank you note, the gratitude was for so much more. In fact, for those reading the notes (titled *93 Thank yous*), I

wanted the thanks to be about and for the person, the connection made over the object received.

The second piece created in response to the trade project (*Untitled*) is a ceramic sculpture. A ceramic stone has been hand formed to represent each person I made a trade with. I initially envisioned tying each stone to another with handspun wool, representing our physical connections, but I decided against this as it seemed too obvious and I felt the work was stronger without this element. A cairn has been constructed as they traditionally mark a path or a pilgrimage. Yet more than simply a marker of a journey (my journey), the rocks double as a rough altar of thanks. The inspiration for this piece came from a quote from Aristotle: "That is why we set up a shrine of the Graces [Charities] in a public place, to remind men to return a kindness, for that is a special characteristic of grace, since it is a duty not only to repay a service done one, but in another time to take the initiative in doing a service oneself." (Godbout 101) Filled with gratitude, I wanted to create a marker in a public place, recognizing and acknowledging those that I am now tied to and the mark they have left on me. Though cairns are normally situated on the ground, it has been an intentional choice to elevate it, a reference to literally raising the work off the ground as well as elevating the relationships it represents.

The Debt Project Blog

Throughout the year's research, I have used The Debt Project blog, a blog that I created, to document and share my progress. Though my research initially started with wanting to address one's relationship with personal debt, I

intentionally chose to keep the title as my project evolved as it became more and more evident to me that through the gifting process I have become indebted to those that I have worked with. This project can be viewed at:

<https://thedebtproject.wordpress.com/>.

Concluding Statement

So what happens when I give my work away? Can community be built through the act of gifting? For me, the work was received which was the biggest gift anyone could return to me. As Judith Butler writes, “...I am invariably transformed by the encounters I undergo; recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was.” (27) I now feel I am part of a wider community. I have made contacts and have had conversations that will stay with me for a long time. And those shared conversations helped shaped each participant’s understanding of the work and project, including my own. Each trade represents more than the objects that were exchanged. Each trade, each encounter, holds a conversation and an exchange of time and self between two individuals. I have been supported, and engaged, and I leave *changed*.

I Believe...a manifesto

So why explore alternative economies like gift or barter systems when I am overwhelmed with debt? Why “give” my work away when I desperately need to make money?

- I believe we lack a sense of belonging, that we remove ourselves from the greater (or more intimate) sense of community when we only participate in mass consumerism.
- I believe we disrespect and limit ourselves and the gifts and skills of others when we limit our acquiring to the consumer market.
- I believe alternative economic systems create greater or more significant opportunities to connect with our neighbour, and can imbue a richer sense of worth into what we are acquiring.
- I believe my debt does not determine what I have to give or offer. I should not be restricted in what I give by what I owe.
- I believe in a system of generosity; a market of surplus and not scarcity.
- I believe that sharing and redistributing our gifts or what we have to offer equalizes the market of community and establishes a greater sense of worth, value, respect and equality amongst the community's members (and anyone can be a member).

Works Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. "Zygmunt Bauman: From Privacy to Publicity: The Changing Mode of Being-in-the-World." Re:publica 2015. Berlin. 13 July 2015. *YouTube*. Web.

Bishop, Claire. "Viewers as Producers." Introduction. *Participation*. London: Whitechapel, 2006. Print.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Leses Du Réel, 2002. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005. Print.

Godbout, Jacques, and Alain Caillé. *The World of the Gift*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1998. Print.

Hudek, Antony. "Detours of Objects." Introduction. *The Object*. London: Whitechapel, 2014. Print.

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift*. New York: Vintage, 2007. Print.

McIlveen, Francis. "Exchange - The "Other" Social Sculpture." *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art*. Albany: State U of New York, 2014. 27-38. Print.

Purves, Ted. *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art*. Albany: State U
of New York, 2014. Print.