

PERFORMING ECONOMIES: WOULD WE LIKE A BEER?

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(photo by phuc le)

Somewhere down in Chinatown, the '70s are coming back. The East L.A. Art scene of late has mined these years—with varying degrees of success and, perhaps, to the brink of exhaustion—but Elana Mann's *Performing Economies* demonstrates just how dynamic and even necessary participatory art can be. For almost three months now, Mann and artists and collectives from across the city have presented panels, performative works and visual artwork exploring the ideas of alternative economies. This interview by Drew Denny.

Tell me the story of *Performing Economies*—when did you get the idea for the show? How did you choose a space and participants?

Elana Mann (organizer/curator): This past February I was invited to submit a proposal for a curatorial project at the Fellows of Contemporary Art. I had just finished a year-long project called 'Exchange Rate: 2008,' which was an international performance exchange

created in response to the 2008 US presidential election. With Performing Economies I was interested in deepening certain ideas and questions that emerged during the Exchange Rate project around politics and participation. I also wanted to highlight a community of Los Angeles artists who are interested in exploring alternative economies of activism and intimacy in this time of global political and economic crises. The Fellows of Contemporary Art was an ideal space to hold this type of exhibit, as it is a model of alternative giving and patronage. The organization, founded in 1975, is made up of 140 art patrons who pay dues and use this money for multiple philanthropic programs, all of which relate to the development of art in California.

I didn't expect to see the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest sharing a bill with artSpa—what's the uniting factor among the participants?

Performing Economies crystallizes a growing movement of Los Angeles based artists who are addressing current political calamities through methodologies of participation, collaboration and community involvement. The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, for example, has an editorial collective that 'facilitate[s] the meeting of artists, political activists, theorists, and media makers' who contribute to their publications and events. artSpa, organized by Adam Overton, works with artists and healers, creating such events as 'open-mic meditations,' 'free aura readings' and 'experimental music and massage.' Both of these projects are deeply invested in social change, whether through political writing and activism or healing workshops.

Could you describe the Free Free Market? What kind of goods and services were gifted at that event?

The Free Free Market (FFM) had nine participants, who are all part of the Artists for Social Justice collective, which was founded by the artist Evelyn Serrano. The gifting at the FFM was really varied—from a woman typing love letters for people passing by, to folks with a table of homemade 'seed bombs,' to a singer offering free voice lessons. One of the artists had a table of goods she was giving away, from cans of soup to jig saws that were all 'acquired'—or stolen. All of the artists were spread out in the courtyard and surrounding the building where the gallery is located. The artists interacted with people coming especially to see them, but also folks passing by who were heading to dinner or to a shop elsewhere in the building. One of the artists gave the janitor of the building a bunch of vegetable plants left over from the day and he planted them in spots all around the outside courtyard. All the participants in the day were really pleased with how it went and are planning to expand the Free Free Market to farmer's markets, the beach, and other social spaces in and around Los Angeles.

I know the Johns pretty well—from CalArts—but I must ask, what's this 'we' business all about?

John Burtle and John Barlog are two artists who often work collaboratively. They both have rectangle tattoos on their forearms, which they use as gallery spaces. The Johns invite people to do projects on/with this particular demarcated spot on their arms. Since working together they have noticed that their language has changed, from 'my project' to 'our project,' from 'I am doing this' to 'We are doing this.' This change in the Johns' language has been a powerful one, shifting their ideas of individual versus collective

identity and they wanted to further explore this shift for the Performing Economies exhibit. For their piece, the Johns proposed that a new form of the English language be used in the gallery space. This new form would eliminate all pronouns except 'we' and 'us,' abolish command forms, and eradicate possessives. Instead of 'Get me a beer,' one would say, 'Would we like a beer?' And so on. Tom McKenzie, the executive director of the Fellows of Contemporary Art, is a writer himself and was excited to help facilitate the use of the language in the space. Tom said that this new form has actually helped him think of the Fellows of Contemporary Art as a 'we' instead of individual members. The Johns also placed a wall didactic on the wall of the gallery explaining to viewers the 'rules' of the new language and inviting people to participate.

This show runs from May through July and involves so many people—did you experience any hiccups in the curatorial process? What have you learned?

The curatorial process was remarkably smooth and maybe this has to do with the fact that the participants in the show are all used to working with others through collaboration or collective art making. Many of the artists have even curated their own projects within the show. In all, over sixty-two artists/collaborations have created artwork through the Performing Economies project, which is pretty remarkable given the size of the gallery space and budget. Of course I have learned so much through this process of working with all the incredible artists participating in the show and with the Fellows of Contemporary Art. One of my curatorial lessons has to do with assuming a type of artistic output for each participant. When I started the exhibit I had the participants divided in my head as to who would make an object for the gallery space and who would produce an event or performance. This was a particularly bad idea, as some of the artists who I thought would want to create a performance expressed a desire to make an object and vice versa. As an artist myself I should have known not to make any conjectures about what an artist would want to create for a specific project. Luckily, this did not create any major problems, but only enriched the exhibition.

So no catastrophes? What about miracles? Surprises?

The show has been a really inspiring experience all around and I can't wait for the rest of the events that are coming up. Last weekend the gallery was visited by various garment district workers who participated in an artwork by Ashley Hunt and Taisha Paggett called 'On Movement, Thought and Politics: Garment Worker's Center, Los Angeles/En el movimiento, el pensamiento y la política: El Centro de Trabajadores de Costura, Los Angeles' (2009). It was wonderful to share the exhibit with them and talk about how some of the ideas of the artworks could be incorporated into their everyday lives. We hope to host more outside groups to the space through the run of the exhibit.

How did the garment workers participate in the piece?

Ashley Hunt and Taisha Paggett began working with the Los Angeles Garment Worker's Center this spring. They conducted various movement workshops, which focused on the way the garment workers' political situation was affecting how they used their bodies at their jobs. Many of them have injuries related to unhealthy ways that they work. Hunt and Paggett also investigated how the garment workers carried or expressed themselves through their bodies in different interactions with each other or with their bosses. For

their piece in the exhibit Hunt and Paggett had the workers direct each other to physically recreate some educational posters. These posters indicate—through endearing hand drawings—different ways to position oneself in negotiations, confrontations with bosses, and discussions with each other. Hunt and Paggett filmed the workers as they were acting out the positions of the characters displayed in three posters and added subtitles in English and Spanish.

How do you critically evaluate the role of activism and/or education in your own work and the work of your participants? Could you give me some examples of works you believe to be inspirational or successful in activism and education? What about works that you believe to be unsuccessful?

Yes, this is a good, but difficult question... Over the past few years there has been a renewed interest in ‘participatory’ artwork that involves artists and art audiences in new and recycled ways. This type of artwork is often positioned as activating a political space. From the recent historical surveys such as Allan Kaprow: Art as Life at L.A.’s MOCA and The Art of Participation 1950-today at SFMOMA to exhibitions highlighting new artwork, such as Perific 8: Art As Gift Biennial for Contemporary Art in Iasi, Romania, artists worldwide are creating salons, swap meets, gardens, walking tours, and schools. Art institutions are focusing on interaction, collectivity and collaboration like never before. These projects are created for different reasons—to activate the viewer, so that she or he will be more active in the world, to counteract the disappearance of social bonds in our communities, to be more inclusive rather than exclusive and question authorship of the singular ‘I,’ etc. However, many of these projects are utilizing participatory methodologies as a style rather than a pointed political stance. Some of these projects ask people to do things and participate, but have no critical substance behind their actions, or else create an experience that ultimately a community doesn’t really want or need. The artwork that I chose to highlight in Performing Economies emphasizes artists who are investigating the ways in which participatory and collaborative approaches can challenge the socio-political context in which they are produced. These projects function as social critique rather than style and have direct political content rather than empty symbolic gestures.

How can we—the Los Angeles community—access these people and these types of events outside of Performing Economies?

There are some great alternative art spaces in Los Angeles where people can find the types of events that are part of Performing Economies. There is Machine Project in Echo Park, Outpost for Contemporary Art and Sea and Space Explorations in Highland Park, Beta Level and the Public School in Chinatown and g727 and Farmlab in downtown Los Angeles. These are just a few examples of a growing movement in the Los Angeles art community. LACMA recently hosted a day of ephemeral projects with Machine Project and MOCA has started a series of events called ‘Engagement Parties.’ I think museums are currently trying out different methods of hosting this sort of project.

What advice would you give to people looking for ways to create and interact with alternative economies in their own communities?

What I have learned through researching and creating artwork for this exhibit is that there

are currently thousands of alternative economic structures in the world and these movements are currently gaining momentum. I merely had to scratch the surface and was amazed at the plethora of complementary economies that are in existence all over the globe. Here in the city of Los Angeles you have the Echo Park Time Bank and a Co-Op starting in Highland Park. Some great examples of alternative economic structures can be found on the websites of the E.F. Schumacher Society and the Local Exchange Trading Systems—LETS. However, in many ways these alternative economic structures are only making up for the enormous problems of our national and international economic systems. Along with creating our own local systems, people need to pressure our government to initiate necessary reforms and changes to our current economic system.

PERFORMING ECONOMIES THROUGH SAT., JULY 25, AT FELLOWS OF CONTEMPORARY ART, 970 N. BROADWAY, STE. 208, CHINATOWN. CLOSING RECEPTION 2 PM / FREE / ALL AGES. MORE INFORMATION AND GALLERY HOURS AT FOCALA.ORG. VISIT ELANA MANN AT ELANAMANN.COM