

Elana Mann On Performing Economies

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In February 2009 I was invited to submit a proposal for a curatorial project at the Fellows of Contemporary Art (FOCA), a non-profit organization in Los Angeles, CA. I had just finished a year-long endeavor entitled Exchange Rate: 2008, an international performance exchange I created in response to the 2008 US presidential election (www.exchangerate2008.com). While developing a concept for the exhibition at FOCA, I was interested in deepening certain ideas and questions that emerged during the Exchange Rate project around politics and participatory artwork. I also wanted to highlight a community of Los Angeles artists who are exploring alternative economies of activism and intimacy in this time of global political and economic crises.

The curatorial project I eventually created was called Performing Economies (May, 2009- July, 2009), which included objects, videos, and documentation, as well as performances, panels, and workshops. FOCA was an ideal space to host Performing Economies, as it is a model of alternative patronage. The FOCA organization, founded in 1975, is made up of 130 members who pay yearly dues used to maintain the organization and promote philanthropic programs. All of FOCA's programs relate to the development of art in California and most of the fellows are art collectors, gallerists, or art enthusiasts.

Initially I invited twelve individual artists, collaborative duos, and collectives working in Los Angeles to contribute to the exhibition. The participants included myself, the Artists for Social Justice Collective, John Barlog and John Burtle, CamLab, Dorit Cypis, Karla Diaz, Liz Glynn, Marc Herbst, Ashley Hunt and Taisha Paggett, the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Editorial Collective (Marc Herbst, Robby Herbst and Christina Ulke), Adam Overton, and Vincent Ramos. When approaching these artists I offered the chance to curate live events and projects within Performing Economies. In turn the artists themselves invited or included many others in dialogs, performances, participatory projects, and so on. In the end the number of participating artists who contributed original artwork to the exhibition totaled over sixty-two. Since the budget was \$1,000 and the exhibition space under 1,000 square feet this final figure was quite astounding. In many cases each curatorial endeavor by Performing Economies artists could have been its own separate exhibition, and this added a great deal of energy to the project.

The artwork and events of Performing Economies varied from the poetic and allegorical to the pragmatic and pedagogical. All of the projects created for the exhibit dealt with social change, whether directly or circuitously. Issues of language, the body, and communication were central to most of the artworks. Some of the projects used existing political symbols and contexts, while others manifested as propositions for unconventional systems and structures. There was a fierce dialog between hope and critique that played out in different ways through each artwork. For the purposes of this article I will briefly discuss each project in Performing Economies, knowing full well that this surface treatment does not do the artwork justice. For more information and images of individual works I would encourage the reader to visit the FOCA website www.focala.org, click on the "projects" tab, and then the Performing Economies section. The first artworks I would like to discuss involve elements of communication with artists offering unorthodox means for dialog. These artworks set the groundwork for how

viewers interacted in the physical space of the gallery. John Barlog and John Burtle, invented a new form of the English language to be used in the gallery space, entitled “would WE like to try this?” 2008-9. This new form eliminates all pronouns except “we” and “us,” abolishes command forms, and eradicates possessives. Instead of “Get me a beer,” one would say, “Would we like a beer?” and so on. The former executive director of FOCA, Tom McKenzie, said this piece greatly influenced how he interacted in the gallery/office space with visitors as well as FOCA members.

Dorit Cypis, an artist and mediator, also deals with the physical and mental spaces between people in her ongoing project entitled Foreign Exchanges. When describing her project, Cypis writes, “Foreign Exchanges blends communication, negotiation, and option setting tools from mediation with perceptual, analytic, and creativity tools for the artist to engage with and transform conflict.” For the exhibit Cypis bartered conflict resolution consultations of Foreign Exchanges with local businesses and offered a workshop in the gallery itself around the self and the other. She placed a promotional sign for Foreign Exchanges directly outside of the gallery, and carried a duplicate sign with her when she held her workshops elsewhere.

The potentials of socio-political change were addressed in many ways, whether through political discussion, writing and activism, or healing workshops. The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Editorial Collective “facilitate[s] the meeting of artists, political activists, theorists, and media makers” who contribute to their publications and events. For their piece in the exhibit, the Journal facilitated a panel around “the emotionality of collectivities and social change.” Participants in the panel were Matias Viegner of Fallen Fruit, Autumn Rooney and Liz Gerstein of the Echo Park Time Bank, organizers of the Public School at Telic Arts Exchange, and Jessica Fleischmann (Journal of Aesthetics and Protest designer). The panel members discussed emotional trials and triumphs in their own collaborative endeavors.

Marc Herbst, co-editor of the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, also produced the comic book, Fashion Guide 2012, 2009 for the exhibit. The book concentrated on the next five years of fashion, from re-interpreting success to re-branding shared values and resources, formerly thought of as mundane. Herbst writes that he “refers to this as a project of fashion and style because these are the artistic mediums through which particular social interactions get formalized, solidified, routinized.” The comic book mixes jewelry and scarves culled from the pages of Vogue and Elle with bike riding and trips to the farmers market, illustrating a paradigm shift that is stylish and inviting.

artSpa, organized by Adam Overton, invokes social change more obliquely. Instead of focusing on direct activism Overton gathers together an expanding public and private forum for artists, performers, and musicians who have skills and interests in healing, alternative therapy, and wellness. For Performing Economies, Overton worked with various collaborators to create two free artists led workshops geared toward expanding and enhancing visionary and healing abilities. One event was an “open-mic meditation,” where Overton led an experimental meditation group and the other was a “free aura reading” with Krystal Krunch (a.k.a. Asher Hartman & Haruko Tanaka). These workshops provided an alternative framework in which to question and battle the stress and stain of contemporary society.

A few artists in Performing Economies worked with direct political symbols and social contexts. Liz Glynn created No Resistance Is Futile, 2009, a black and white video

work shot in an old train station in Milan, Italy. The train station itself had many architectural remnants from the Fascist era in Italy. The video displays a group of people as they struggle to break up a bundle of sticks (a Fascist symbol) and eventually succeed. In addition to the video, Glynn organized a panel discussion between herself and the artists Andrea Bowers, Olga Koumoundouros, and Karen Lofgren on the economics of making artwork, particularly sculpture.

Ashley Hunt and Taisha Paggett also used symbology in their artwork, *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*, which was created during movement and discussion workshops with the Los Angeles Garment Worker's Center. Hunt and Paggett asked that the workers direct each other to physically recreate three educational posters from the Garment Worker's Center. These posters indicate (through simple line drawings) different ways to position one's body in negotiations, confrontations with bosses, and discussions with each other. Hunt and Paggett filmed the workers as they act out the postures of the characters in the posters and added subtitles in English and Spanish to the video.

For my own contribution to *Performing Economies* I created two pieces that draw upon a global movement of community-determined economies. In each other we trust, 2009, is a diptych of banners displaying images from a network of over 4,000 communities world-wide that have created their own currencies, time-banks, barter, and gifting systems. *Complementary currency in three acts: for Advanced Drawing students, for FOCA, for Mañana Por La Mañana, 2009*, was a series of original currencies I produced. These currencies were created in consultation and collaboration with the community for which it was made and then gifted to that group. Currently the currencies are being circulated outside of national and international monetary systems.

Inherent in the artwork of *Performing Economies* are two competing directions; one is a sense of optimism with which to create new socio-economic realities in this time of severe political calamity, while the other is a need to fiercely critique the failure of current political systems. In regards to hope, a few artists presented invitations to dance, perform, and dialog, such as Vincent Ramos' *Come on Everybody-Let's Do The Twist, 2009*. Ramos created this work in anticipation of the 50th anniversary of singer Chubby Checker's version of "The Twist" a (two-time) number one hit record that sparked an international dance craze of the same name. The piece incorporates six drawings that function as "contractual" invitations geared toward six of Ramos' friends, individuals with whom he wanted to "twist" with. The contracts affirmed that each friend would celebrate "The Twist" with Ramos and at the conclusion of the project, the drawings would be given to each participant. For this piece, Ramos compared the political and cultural optimism present during the emergence of "The Twist" in the early sixties with the renewed hope that Obama's 2008 election sparked. To kick off the year of twisting, Ramos invited the six participants in his project to create performances for an event he organized at FOCA entitled *Call me lightning*.

Clonglobation, 2009, by CamLab (Anna Mayer and Jemima Wyman), also invited play and interaction through a two-part costume to be occupied by a series of performers. With this garment, CamLab literalized the dynamic of their collaborative process, which works to disrupt conventional ideas of an autonomous body. The garment was passed around each week of the exhibit to another pair of performers, creating a

“chain” of engagements and propositions that attempted to produce a collective body regardless of distance. Documentation of the evolving actions surrounding the suit was presented in the gallery space and grew over the course of the exhibit. CamLab also performed at FOCA in *Swoon Soon Suit*, which is a two-person costume that invites a viewer to enter into a fabric tent where CamLab touches, tickles, and plays.

Free Free Market (FFM), an ongoing project created by the Artists for Social Justice collective, embodied both emotions of hope and a deep-seated discontent with the status quo (participants in the FFM included: Yanira Cartagena, Carmina Escobar, Carribean Fragoza, Anne Hars, Matt Lucero, Gil Omry, Astra Price, Evelyn Serrano, and Elizabeth Wild). FFM took place over one day and was comprised of a wide variety of gifting, from a woman typing love letters for anyone 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, like cans of soup and jig saws that were all “acquired” (or stolen). Participants in FFM are planning to expand the project to farmers markets, the beach, and other social spaces in and around Los Angeles.

Like the Free Free Market Karla Diaz’s performance explored the idea of economy, not as it pertains to monetary value, but rather as it pertains to listening, dialogue, collaboration, and trading stories. Investigating multiple narrative strategies between sound and text, Karla Diaz read a series of poems and stories based on the experience of growing up in Los Angeles. In particular, Diaz explored the neighborhood of Boyle Heights and parts of it that were destroyed to build a bigger Police Station.

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 the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, *The Art of Participation 1950-today* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, to exhibitions highlighting new artwork, such as *Perific 8- Art As Gift, Biennial for Contemporary Art in Iasi, Romania*, artists world-wide 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 s/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 to question authorship of the singular “I,” etc. However, a large number of these projects are utilizing participatory methodologies as a style rather than a pointed political stance. Some of these types of projects ask people to do things and participate, but have no critical substance behind their actions, or else create a project/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/collaborative approaches can challenge the socio-political context in which they are produced. These projects connect with artists in Los Angeles and elsewhere, artists such as Carolina Caycedo, Ted Purves, Suzanne Lacy, *Temporary Services* and Ben Kinmont, artists who continue to inspire and stimulate ideas about politics, society, and culture.