

NO LONGER NORMAL
CRITICAL EXCHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF ART

Ted Purves and Shane Aslan Selzer

Dinner

On any given day, we navigate constantly through shifting landscapes of exchange. Sometimes we are aware of our passage, but more often than not our navigation occurs without a great deal of thought. For many of us, this daily navigation of complex territories of exchange is simply normal and unremarkable—something we are socialized to understand almost intuitively.

We pay our rent from our checking account. We pay for clothes online using funds we borrow through a credit card. We borrow a book from the library for a few weeks and return it when we have finished reading it. We read an article on the Internet and send it to a friend by pressing a button that says “share.” We sit and share an orange on a bench in a city park. While it is somewhat obvious to say that these exchanges are all quite different from one another, it is perhaps less obvious to say that the differences between them are best understood not by looking at what in particular was exchanged, but by considering the systems of exchange that governed each of them.

Try to imagine it this way.

You have a child, and one afternoon you discover that you are in need of groceries to prepare the dinner that you had planned for the two of you to eat that night. Time is short, so you ask your neighbor to drop you off at the grocery store on her way to work. At the grocery store, you select the food you need for the evening and pay the cashier. When you leave the store, you notice that it has started raining, so you decide to wait for the city bus to take you home, spending a dollar for the fare, rather than walk in the rain. When you get home, you and your child prepare dinner. You sit at the table. The meal is eaten together.

In this simple story, the main character has made a series of exchanges, but what is significant about them is that the specifics of each of those exchanges were governed by a rotating array of economic systems. What compels your

neighbor to say yes when you ask for a ride to the grocery store? Why would you spend time and effort to prepare a meal and then give half of it away to a child, who did nothing to help produce it? Such questions reveal the workings of what is arguably the first, and oldest, economic system that we participate in, which is termed a *traditional* (or *social*) economy. This is a system governed, first and foremost, by participants who live in ongoing association with one another, originally in a village or a tribe, now, more commonly, in a family, or circle of friends, or a neighborhood. Such institutions as barter, favors, and filial obligations govern the primary mechanisms of exchange in a traditional economy. In our story above, this system of exchange is what sanctioned (and structured) the request of a ride from the neighbor, and it is the framework upon which the protagonist, as a parent, takes the responsibility to provide food for his or her child.

Why would a city or community have a bus, which drives along the street whether anyone is riding it or not? Why can someone ride it for miles and others for a few blocks, while both pay the same fare? These questions reveal a second system, which is termed a *redistributive* (or *command*) economy. In this system, resources, goods, and services are taken or levied from those who produce them by a state or governing entity, which then redistributes them to various areas of the society in accordance with goals and policies. In our story, it is this redistributive economy that provided a city bus service (likely built with the proceeds from taxes) and set the price level for the one-dollar fare.

Why is a grocery store (which, for example, neither raises vegetables nor produces its own milk) able to concentrate so many varied foods into a single location? What determines the price that is paid for these varied goods, and why might these prices shift as products go on or off sale. A shop, or a market, exemplifies the system of the *capital* economy, where resources, goods, and services are exchanged in relation to abstract systems of exchange, such as money or currency. In capital economies both the resources and the currency can shift in value in relation to each other, due to either speculation and/or supply and demand. This “fluidity” of capital economies is what creates the possibility for investment, loaning, and wagering, as the shifting prices of the market allow for profits to be made simply by guessing which way values might shift. Again, we can refer to our story above, where the lone capital transaction was the purchase of food at the grocery store. Its price was set in relation to both the cost of the food for the market as well as the “overhead” costs associated with running the store (employee salaries, utility costs, etc.), and it also contained a certain level of profit added in, which is taken by the owner of the market.

It is generally agreed that the above systems are the three primary economic systems (or systems of exchange) that have evolved over the course of human history. As seen in our examples, an economic system is a method for producing, distributing, and consuming goods and services. No country (or

city, or state) is governed by just one; most are controlled by a mixture of the three. It is important to note that economic systems not only encompass the *mechanisms* of exchange (e.g., currency or barter goods), but also incorporate the social institutions that govern and manage the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. This can mean tangible institutions such as a market, a bank, or the Federal Reserve, as well as intangible institutions such as marriages, community services, or a birthday party.

While the story details a series of fairly straightforward exchanges, it is worth noting that the shifts between economic systems means that even this simple set of encounters contains complexities of great interest as we move forward. The food, which is bought with currency, is later shared with another without any subsequent repayment. The trip from the store is the same distance either way, but it is “paid for” quite differently. Each of these systems contains its own rules, and the terms of exchange in one do not really transfer to any of the others. You would not usually consider charging your child money for the meal you prepared, any more than you would tell the bus driver that instead of paying the fare that you will give her a ride tomorrow.

Basketfill

These systems of exchange are the ground upon which the artists’ projects assembled and investigated in this book are constructed. It is the landscape that they occur within, as well as what they are attempting to make meaning of and from.

One such landscape can be found in the town of Nsukka, in southeast Nigeria. Once a small town, Nsukka has grown to become a cultural zone of over a million people, and the pressures of a rapidly shifting economy have resulted in a massive influx of internal migration as the population has moved from rural villages to urban areas in search of work and opportunity. It is there in this bustling town, the home to the University of Nigeria, that Amuche Ngwu-Nnabueze initiated the Sculpted Basket Project (SBP). In the most straightforward sense, SBP is an ongoing project that takes the form of workshops and community organizing while producing woven objects for exhibition, use, and exchange. Ngwu-Nnabueze wanted to address the potential overlap between the disappearance of traditional basket weaving and a major issue facing her community: waste removal. The growth of population in this area has far outpaced the local government’s ability to provide basic infrastructure, which has resulted in a proliferation of open waste dumps full of unsorted throwaway materials, some degradable and some not.

Following an intensive series of meetings, first with the local community and subsequently with such institutional forces as the university and the municipal administrators, Ngwu-Nnabueze started holding workshops to teach traditional methods of basket weaving using reclaimed waste material, which

would simultaneously raise awareness about environmental waste problems. The result is an ongoing social project that fuses waste separation, composting, and basket weaving, one that presents baskets as traditional, sustainable, functional replacements for plastic bags, plastic seats, and other items generally made from imported or unsustainable materials. It also proposes the revival of a somewhat dormant tradition of producing locally woven baskets as transporting vehicles, made from repurposed fabrics, plastics, wood, and metal found in the local dumps.

Ngwu-Nnabueze conceptualized the project to interpenetrate a variety of social groups as well as various local institutions. She first considered who the project might impact, and how those impacted might become personally involved in the project. This was largely determined by the population attending the initial workshops, and extended to the many roundtable meetings SBP held to pull in schools, churches, civil authorities, and public service agents. She then considered the various public institutions that the project would both intersect with and draw upon: sanitation systems, traditional methods of basket weaving, workshops, radio stations, and church bulletins. These forms were deliberately chosen to reflect and respond to the needs of those who were becoming personally involved in the project through regular attendance at the workshops. Out of these gatherings a campaign was launched to begin the sorting, recycling, and composting of waste.

SBP can be broken down into a number of separate parts: a civic organization, a lobbying group of concerned citizens, as well as a craft project producing woven baskets using traditional techniques. But separating these elements of the project undermines its conceptual premise and devalues the leveraging of the various local systems of exchange that the project navigated between as it went from inception to action. By fusing the removal (or nonremoval) of waste, generally considered to be a part of a functioning redistributive economy, with a community-based workshop (part of a traditional/social economy), in the service of producing baskets (which are both reusable and saleable, and thus have an impact on the local market economy), the project attempts to harness together a series of disparate interests to create a tangible physical and social result. The fact that the project is also created as an art project adds an extra dimension, as the Sculpted Basket Project also has the potential to be considered by a nonlocal audience, through critical institutions of the art world such as exhibitions and publications (including this one). In this framework, the project also has the potential to be seen in a larger, critical discourse, one where its varied exchanges and the objects it produced also function symbolically.

#criticalexchanges

This pulls into focus one of the key lenses of this book: *critical exchanges*. What are critical exchanges and what criteria might we put forward for understanding how they operate? Critical exchanges occur within works in which the

participants (audience/collaborators/institutions) are made consciously aware of the *transfers* that occur within the work. They make visible the conditions and stakes that are required for the production of the work, and, at times, the participants may have a voice within the process and that voice could affect the ultimate outcome of the project. This awareness of the transfer(s) of power, of material, of resources, or knowledge, forms a core aspect of both the work itself and its attendant meanings. Rather than emphasizing process or production as the outcome, the exchange itself becomes the most important outcome identified through the project.

In 2002, Santiago Sierra initiated a new work entitled *Person Saying A Phrase*, in Birmingham, England. For this work, he hired a person begging for money on a busy shopping street to be filmed stating the following phrase: "My participation in this project could generate \$72,000 profit. I am paid £5" One point of this project is possibly to expose the myth that most participatory artworks are inherently generous, by showing ways that they are potentially self-serving and often profoundly unequal in terms of who benefits from their production. But there is a more pressing issue that is poetically brought to the surface by this work, namely, the terms or social contract engaged to produce works that are dependent on social interaction. When Sierra makes these terms transparent, he also puts them at the center of the work itself, asking questions about how value is determined during an exchange.

By asking his hired participant to recite the script about payment, Sierra ensures that the participant is also fully aware of the discrepancy in how his "work" is compensated, versus how Sierra's "work" may be later rewarded. Sierra does nothing to rectify this problem, and no solution is proposed. But the issue is made public, and that becomes the core of the work. The video produces an uncomfortable scenario for its viewers about privilege and access. It points back to Sierra himself as a conscious party to this inequality and the hired participant as a disempowered subject, one who is participating in the exchange for small monetary gain rather than refusing the terms of the exchange based on the inequities of the agreement.

Critical exchanges look at the power dynamics in relationships (those within the art world and those beyond), but they aren't necessarily focused on representation; they are less interested in interpreting or constructing meaning and more concerned with demystifying power relationships through an active encounter. In this respect, critical exchange is a way of practicing what Cornel West terms "demystification," for it attempts to understand not only why something is the way it is, but also all the historical and social forces that have made something act the way it does today.¹ During a critical exchange, the conditions of the exchange itself are highlighted in such a way that they provide an expanded view of the cultural, historical, and sociopolitical forces at play. In this respect, we are using the word *critical* not simply within its most common definition, where it is understood to mean careful (or even

disapproving) judgment or evaluation, but in its alternate definition, where the word critical describes a crucial juncture or turning point, a place where a situation or fact may suddenly change or transform.

You've Got Form

Part of understanding how criticality operates within these projects comes from an understanding of the forms that these projects occupy. While it might sound somewhat traditionalist, when it comes to artworks, there is an integral relationship between form and content, and any assessment of a work's efficacy is incomplete if there is no acknowledgement of the form by which it manifested. That said, it's certainly the case that most, if not all, of the projects considered in this book do not manifest in forms that we would readily identify as artworks (e.g., there are few paintings and sculptures detailed in these pages). However, this does not mean that these works do not have form; rather, it means that we have to turn to other frameworks to understand the forms that they do have. This leads us to bring forward the concept of *social form*.

In his essay "The Problem of Sociology," the German-born philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel defined social form as the mode of interaction among individuals through (or in) the shape of which specific content achieves social reality. Simmel positioned these social forms as being distinct from social content, which is considered to be the interest, purpose, or motive of an interaction.² As such, a social form could be something like a street vendor's cart, a protest march, a meeting at work, a trade union, or a wedding. For the purposes of this book, the concept of social form has far-reaching implications, not simply because it extends a familiar art-historical concept of form to a large group of artists' projects that, at first glance, might not have an obvious form, but more importantly because the consideration of social forms gives us an added ability to talk about the mechanics of criticality that operates within these projects.

An example might serve at this point. Consider the work *Untitled (Beauty)* (1994), by the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. For this project, the artist, and others, cooked Thai curries in the Jack Hanley Gallery of San Francisco for a month, and served them for free to anyone who came into the gallery. This work was one of a long series of such projects that Tiravanija performed in galleries during the early 1990s. Considered in terms of its basic content and its structure as a participatory artwork, *Untitled (Beauty)* and similar works by Tiravanija have been widely discussed within the field of art criticism as a utopian gesture. They are generally credited with carving out a convivial space in the gallery wherein participants were drawn together, lured by a free meal, and (together with the artist) generated an ongoing social space where their relations were both open to experience and also (due to the work's location in a gallery) "framed" as a social sculpture. However, when the work is considered in terms of social form, it is possible to read somewhat different meanings in the work.

Commercial art galleries, as social forms, can be thought of as a particular form of “shop.” However, unlike most shops (where members of the public become customers or shoppers upon entering the shop, whether they actually purchase something or not), in most commercial art galleries, members of the public are not generally considered to be potential buyers of the wares that the gallery/shop is offering. If you work in a gallery, you quickly learn to call these people “visitors,” such as you would have at a museum or a zoo. What happens within this space when there is no artwork on display, and the gallery is required, through the “rules” of the artwork that they have commissioned, to serve free food to those who come into the space? Of course many things can (and do) happen, but on a structural, or formal, level, the gallery is no longer able to treat these people simply as “visitors.” You do not feed free meals to visitors, after all; such people are usually called guests. Through this sequence of modifications to the social form of the gallery, it is possible to see how critical relations arise: What changes for the worker in the gallery (who is now a host), and for the visitors (who are now guests)?

Centering the consideration of social projects from the vantage point of form shifts the central questions from ones centered on ideas of a project’s meaning to a consideration of a project’s capacity: How does it operate within the social world, and for whom? How does it interact with the surrounding social forms that form its immediate social context? What is the work’s agency? After all, we do not encounter social forms in a vacuum—they are adjacent to (and interpenetrate) other social forms, as much as they are discrete unto themselves.

In a landscape of social forms, the recognition of the forms we are within are of ongoing importance. We enter someone’s home for a dinner party as a guest. In the Tiravanija example *Untitled (Beauty)*, we enter a gallery as a visitor who then is asked to become a guest by sitting down and being served a free meal. Both of these points of entry are something that we know almost sub-intellectually; they are parts of the world of social forms that we have been raised within, things that we have an almost inherent grasp of. This learned familiarity with social forms is, obviously, similar to the familiarity that we have with systems of economic exchange, as discussed in the first section of this essay.

While this brief discussion of social form has focused on the form of the gallery/shop, critical exchanges can occupy any number of social forms—from dinner parties to potlucks, from community meetings to online encounters, quite literally any social form wherein we would normally expect to find one or another system of exchange in play. When such social forms are taken up by artists and subsequently altered to achieve more idiosyncratic or subjective ends, it is possible to become disoriented, to have a moment of adjustment that requires a shift in thinking and reaction. It is in this moment of realignment that a possibility of critical exchange arises—where the form is seen not just for the moment when it is strange, but for all of the prior times we have entered it when it was “normal.”

+1 Add Friend

At this point it is useful to look outward to the landscapes of exchange within which we, as a people, as societies, are living. As has been discussed, there is, in each of us, almost an inbuilt sense of order to the shifts in systems of exchange that we encounter as we go through our daily lives. But if we look back at the last twenty five years (which is roughly the timeframe for the projects that this volume considers) or even the last ten years (which is the amount of time that elapsed between the bulk of the writing in the first edition of this book and the present edition), it is clear that that the exchanges we live within on a daily basis aren't quite as ordered as they once were. They are no longer normal, and the ground under us has changed.

While exchange systems morph and evolve over time,³ it is difficult not to look back over the periods of time covered by this book and imagine that the rate of evolution for economic systems has somehow had a finger pressed firmly on the fast-forward button, so fast that they seem to collapse into each other as each permutation is explored by global enterprise. It is this period that John Berger summarized (beautifully, as always) in his essay "Where Are We":

Might it not be better to see and declare that we are living through the most tyrannical—because the most pervasive—chaos that has ever existed? It's not easy to grasp the nature of the tyranny, for its power structure (ranging from the 200 largest multinational corporations to the Pentagon) is interlocking yet diffuse, dictatorial yet anonymous, ubiquitous yet placeless. It tyrannizes from offshore, not only in terms of Fiscal Law but in terms of any political control beyond its own. Its aim is to delocalize the entire world. Its ideological strategy . . . is to undermine the existent so that everything collapses into its special version of the virtual, from the realm of which—and this is the tyranny's credo—there will be a never-ending source of profit.⁴

While details of this drastic shift are beyond the scope of this essay, a single example might serve as instructive. Ten years ago, at the time when we were writing the last edition, the world (or at least the digitally linked or "wired" world) was just beginning to glimpse what would come to be collectively called "Web 2.0," a nest of innovations that included social networking, free webmail, blogs, and photo-sharing. The first rush of the arrival of Web 2.0 could be seen in the emergence of user-driven websites such as YouTube, MySpace, Napster, and FlickrWeb, among other offerings. The basic idea of Web 2.0 represented not just a new mode of internet technology, it also represented a totally different outlook on how to harness creative energy to create meaningful (and meaningless) content. Unlike earlier websites, which created their content

“in-house” and then “uploaded” it to the web for people to see, these websites created a platform that grew somewhat organically, primarily using the creative energy of their users, who uploaded their own content at the same time they were seeing and reading content generated by others.⁵

This shift represented not just a break from a traditional model of producer and consumer; it also demonstrated an entirely different economic model for production, wherein content is produced entirely off of the creative surplus of the “wired” populace. Of course, the users of sites like Flickr and YouTube are (by and large) not paid for their creative efforts, and one of the initial notions around these sites is that they actually represented something of a high-tech version of a traditional economy, specifically a barter economy with a user-community at its heart. In this economy, users got free email, free access to a larger public, free opportunities to exchange thoughts and information, in exchange for which they supplied their creative energy (and watched a small amount of advertising that was placed on the sites) to generate both content and “traffic” (which was a tracking of how many visits a site had over the course of a day).

This system of production came to be called “crowdsourcing,”⁶ and it represented a significant innovation in terms of both exchange and creative production. This innovation was viewed with great optimism by the “wired” public, who invested these various platforms for user-interaction and exchange with a belief that they might create an almost global system of “free” personalized communication and information exchanges. However, within a few years, as one after another of the companies supporting this technology “went public” with multi-billion-dollar IPOs, many users realized the truth in what was quickly becoming a new maxim: When you get something for free, you are not the customer, you are the product.

Consider the example of Facebook. Launched in 2004, Facebook, initially offered a nominally free platform for college students to create an online representation of their social “self,” where they could post pictures, communicate with friends, build networks, chat with each other, and share their lives, as well as their “likes.” The site was gradually opened up to the general population and exploded in popularity. Over this same period, Facebook was collecting staggering amounts of data from all of its users, not just in terms of the content they uploaded, but also information on what other websites they visited, what they might buy or look at after they left. In May of 2012, Facebook went public, trading about 490 million shares in its first day, and raising sixteen billion dollars for the company. What is particularly instructive about this for the purposes of this essay is not simply the staggering amount of capital that was raised, primarily through monetizing the digital production of billions of social exchanges (which were by and large not created for any form of monetary payment); the thing to note is that this public offering completed a transfer of the product of one economic system (information and

content arising from the social economy of Internet users) into another (the monetized information capital). All of those discrete and personal likes, all of the friending and unfriending, all of the shared photos and games of Scrabble spawned countless shares of Facebook stock.⁷

There remain, however, signs that this collapse between systems (and cultures) of exchange does not simply collapse in one direction. For example, one of the more interesting aspects of this new economy that converts crowd-sourced content into data for advertising and marketing is that, despite the disparity between the gift economy of its producers and the monetizing power of its owners, it must still (somewhat) rely on open access to continue to make profits. New veins of information must be continually laid down, like sediment, into the oceanic server farms that underlie the information economy, from where it can be productively mined for yet more data. This has created a situation where continuous need for content is turned to surprising (and startling) ends. One can spend an hour on YouTube and see, literally, almost anything. Homemade videos of cats sleeping are only a single click away from a political rant filmed in a bedroom in Holland or an illegal upload of a Bollywood drama.

A more dramatic and visible example of the forces at play in this situation was seen in early 2010, when the “Arab Spring” protests, fueled in part by tactical use of Facebook and Twitter, spread across a dozen countries in the Middle East and North Africa. In many cases, these new social media platforms were used to facilitate, very quickly and on a mass scale, a “low-tech” strategy that has served the masses for centuries: gather in great numbers in a public place and refuse to leave until someone in power responds. In the fall of 2011, Occupy Wall Street, a viral, populist array of long-term protests that emerged in many cities across the United States in the midst of an ongoing recession, took many organizing cues from the disparate revolutions of the Arab Spring, using a similar formula of combining sophisticated communications with persistent, physical intransigence. In the Greater New York area, the network of protesters and the communication strategies that linked them were reorganized as Occupy Sandy in order to put to use the organization and distribution tactics employed during the Occupy Wall Street protests in the wake of a natural disaster, Hurricane Sandy, which struck the area in the fall of 2012. Again, a mix of high-tech and age-old strategies was found to be effective. Occupy Sandy was able to network with local churches to help them function as distribution hubs,⁸ and was able to harness the ingenuity of texting, cellphone cameras, and Twitter to act as contemporary versions of SOS signals.

Horizon

While it is important to look at the forces at play in this collapsing realm of exchanges and economies, it is naive to imagine that artists’ tactical uses of

critical exchanges will “solve” the problems that have arisen, or redress the mendacity that lies behind them. Nonetheless, they remain full of possibility. Learning how to speak about the times we are living through is vital. In his essay “The Subject and Power,” Michel Foucault wrote: “Maybe the most certain of all philosophical problems is the problem of the present time and of *what we are* in this very moment.” This sentence builds upon his reading of a question raised by Kant almost two hundred years prior, “Was Heist Aufklärung?” which Foucault elaborated to mean, “What is going on just now? What is happening to us? What is this world, this period, this precise moment in which we are living?”⁹

One of most pressing tasks is for us to understand *how we are* (and *who we are*) within these hyperglobalized realms of exchange. If the projects in this book can be seen as critical exchanges, and we can see this process of critical exchange being furthered by tactical uses of existing social forms, there is then a substantial framework in place to understand how their criticality has an integral relationship to the social and economic world that forms their context. There is the possibility that they can slow down a moment of exchange long enough for us not just to see it fully, but to ask *why*. Why am I giving this away, what is the encounter that forms this moment? It is more than possible that this slowing, this consideration, can form a benchmark from which we navigate our way . . . somewhere. To home. To market. To dinner.

Notes

1. West considered the practice of demystification to be a more forceful (and, in his view, prophetic) mode of critical practice, one that not simply deconstructs but builds a framework for future action. See “The New Politics of Cultural Difference” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).

2. For a thorough introduction to Georg Simmel, readers are directed to Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

3. This morphing over time is one of the central questions addressed by Marcel Mauss in his landmark book *The Gift*. For more on the historical evolution of exchange systems, readers are directed to chapter three of this volume.

4. John Berger, “Where Are We,” from David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture Books, 2003).

5. By most accounts, the term Web 2.0 appeared in Darcy DiNucci’s article “Fragmented Future,” *Print* 53.4 (January 1999), 32.

6. Interestingly, the term *crowdsourcing* was coined largely as a play on a much more negative word, *outsourcing*, which was a term used by corporations to describe the process by which they got rid of their workers as employees and formed one of the primary modes of globalized capitalism.

7. As we write this, at market close today, January 30, 2013, each share is worth \$31.64.

8. It is worth noting that this tactic, which rests on the inbuilt community connections of churches, echoes those used by 1960s civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

9. "The Subject and Power," Michel Foucault, *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (Summer 1982), 785. Foucault goes on to say that an even more pressing problem for philosophy might be to "refuse who we are." In the context of the following projects this might be an even more meaningful goal.

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Reviews

The Politics of Being a Parent in the Art World



by Gregory Sholette

March 4, 2016



Home Affairs, "Does your Gallery, Museum, Conference Center or Gallery Provide Childcare?" screenprint on paper, 22 x 30 in (image courtesy Arzu Ozkal and the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts)

The Let Down Reflex is essential viewing for anyone engaged with issues of caring economies, so-called "women's work," or the question of living wages for the art world's service workers. Smartly curated by **Amber Berson** and **Juliana Driever** at Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA) Project Space, the exhibition of 11 artists (including three collaborations) shines an invaluable light on the typically marginalized task of parenting within the culture industry. Made up of Arzu Ozkal, Claudia Pederson, and Nanette Yannuzzi, the group **Home Affairs** has collectively redefined the phrase "labor of love" by focusing on the fact that female family caregivers must **struggle** twice as much to maintain their art careers, even as the percentage of women **represented** by galleries, museums, and biennials is decidedly below their **presence in the art world workforce**. Home Affairs provides ceremonial "award letters" crediting those — far too few — art institutions showing support for families, like EFA Project Space, which encouraged visitors to bring their kids to the opening of *The Let Down Reflex*. Scheduled for the afternoon, so that parents could get their children home early, the opening dissolved into a clamorous rumpus of young kids amusing themselves at ground level while drab little islands of staid adults gathered in customary art world conversations. One of these tiny, energized attendees was artist **Dillon de Give**'s two-year-old son, Peregrin, who remained that evening to camp-out overnight in the gallery with his father and who

returned to EFA another day and night as a participant in “**By My Own Admission**” (2016), De Give’s “prime time” public art project staging **Peregrin’s bedtime routine** before a live audience.



Dillon & Peregrin de Give, “By My Own Admission” (2016), performance and installation, dimensions variable (photo courtesy Ramsay de Give)



Lise Haller Baggesen, “Motherism” (2013–16), multimedia installation, dimensions variable (photo by Michelle O’Connell, courtesy The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) (click to enlarge)

Other works include **Lise Haller Baggesen**’s feminist, sci-fi, disco space “Motherism” (2013–16), complete with its own pageant of ceremonial flags and a swinging hammock several mothers made good use of during the opening, and a video pastiche by **LoVid** (Tali Hinkis and Kyle Lapidus) called “Kids at a Noise Show” (2015–16), offering images and sound snippets of efforts to manage small children while also functioning as an artist (or is it about being managed by children while trying to function as an artist-parent?). On the far side of the central gallery wall is an unassuming research piece,

“Conversation with Magic Forms” (2015), by the group Leisure (Meredith Carruthers and Susannah Wesley) that visually riffs on a 1970 illustrated autobiography by English artist Barbara Hepworth; in it, the famed sculptor’s family and children appear alongside her abstract, organic forms, suggesting a curious maternal homology (compare this treatment to that of the virile sculptor Brancusi, typically photographed with tools or in his studio sans his one unacknowledged offspring). Meanwhile, a video by the artist, writer, and organizer [Shane Aslan Selzer](#), “Horizonlines: Gowanus” (2013–ongoing) presents a series of fixed-camera shots showing Lower Manhattan viewed from the window of her compact Brooklyn apartment, with a young child cooing and chirping on the soundtrack. Time speeds up, slows down, and seems to reverse as multicolored lighting gels and handwritten notes appear superimposed over the cityscape — the artist-mother’s presence is clearly operative, though never revealed. And finally, in the middle of the space, we hear Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn’s “[The Wages Due Song](#)” (2016), originally written by a mid-’70s Toronto-based feminist collective, with lyrics that chant, “If women got paid for all we do / I’ll tell ya one thing that’s true as true / We wouldn’t be free / but I’m telling you / There’d be a lot of wages due.”

Precedents for service-oriented practices like this reach back to the early 1990s, when Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler [argued](#) that works of art had always concealed a certain degree of service labor, but now this facet of production was becoming unavoidable, as value was “consumed at the same time it is produced.”

Reading this shift in broader, political terms, theorist Sylvia Federici [argues](#):

Leisure (Meredith Carruthers and Susannah Wesley), “Conversation with Magic Forms” (2015), inkjet prints on paper, 22 x 59 in and 74 x 53 in (photo by Michelle O’Connell, courtesy The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) (click to enlarge)

not only has state investment in the work-force been drastically reduced, but reproductive activities have been reorganized as value-producing services that workers must purchase and pay for. In this way, the value which reproductive activities produce is immediately realized, rather than being made conditional on the performance of the workers they reproduce.

Grasping the value added to the discipline of art through the labor of bearing and caring for children is a process of politicization. By “politics” I mean not only undertaking informed critical resistance to institutional standards, but also the imaginative exploration of ideas, the pleasure of communication, the exchange of education, and the construction of collective, sometimes even fantastic alternatives within a space illuminated by dissent. This is precisely the activism we encounter in *The Let Down Reflex*, whose title refers to the reflexive lactation of mothers that’s sometimes accompanied by a stab of pain, as well as perhaps the ache of invisibility associated with nurturing as a service within the indifferent field of high culture. When artists and other cultural workers demand day care be provided from an employer, including even a temporary one such as an art gallery, or when they insist on recognizing the essential economic role played by the seemingly external and “natural” labor of reproduction, these are critiques that challenge the norms and values, both real and symbolic, used to maintain and reproduce the market-driven art world system. Such developments also significantly complement the important work of groups such as [W.A.G.E.](#), [BFAMFAPhD](#), and [Debtfair](#). For an exhibition with a militant motherly touch, don’t miss *The Let Down Reflex*.

Home Affairs' "And Everything Else" (2015) installed at EFA Project Space, with remnants of children's handiwork (photo courtesy the artists and The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) (click to enlarge)

The Let Down Reflex *continues at EFA Project Space (323 W 39th Street, 2nd floor, Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan) through March 12.*

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REVIEWS

sentimental artificiality of theater stages or movie sets—in part because they appear to be as much about people as about the places in which we see them. His *deli* photographic manipulation of the figures seen milling around in the majority of the thirteen works shown here only enhances this impression. In *Mount Rushmore, 1004*, for example, few visitors to the monument are actually looking at the four presidents carved out of the mountain in the background. Instead, they pose for pictures, talk, or simply stand around looking bored. Similarly, in *Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1004*, the Brancusi sculptures on display are dwarfed by the building's spiraling interior and seem all but irrelevant to most art lovers' "museum experience." And in *The Eiffel Tower, 1004*, all we see of the titular structure is its immense base framing an oblivious crowd. Even the pigeon in the central foreground seems to ooze ennui.

It's not surprising, then, that the famous view featured in *Glacier Point, Yosemite, 1004*, takes up less of the traditional composition than the scenic overlook in the foreground. Smearing the viewer at the back of this space rather than at the railing at once emphasizes the immensity and grandeur of the site and reduces it to a commercial. Interestingly, the tourists' shadows fall in different directions, a visual anomaly that both reveals Hall's process of digital alteration and suggests a reason for it. Much as French Rococo painter Hubert Robert carefully positioned the tiny figures in his images of magnificent ruins, Hall meticulously arranges those in his pictures: He makes several exposures from the same vantage point and selects the final cast of characters from those who wandered into view. In this way, Hall's project recalls that of two mid-nineteenth-century photographers, Oscar Reuter and Gustave Le Gray. Reuter Robinson created convincing images by juxtaposing multiple negatives to make a single contact print. In contrast to the then widely held belief in photography as an accurate record of the truth, Robinson once asserted, "Any 'sledge,' or, in comparison of any kind is open to the photographer's use," further noting that "a great deal can be done by the mixture of the real and artificial." Perhaps the common ground between the spectacular world described by Hall and the scenes conjured by Reuter and Robinson is a willingness to reinvent reality for rhetorical purposes.

—Maria Perges



Doug Hall, *Mount Rushmore, 2004*, color photograph, 63 x 63".



Shane Aslan Selzer, *Part of Workhorse, 2005*, steel, sculpture 1000, each part 13 x 22 x 40 1/2".

SHANE ASLAN SELZER LISA DENT GALLERY

In her notably assured first solo exhibition, young San Francisco–based artist Shane Aslan Selzer employed an aesthetic both calculated in its range and instinctual in its use of unusual materials. At Lisa Dent Gallery, Selzer mined a challenging artistic vein sparked, arguably, by the likes of Rachel Harrison via a well-choreographed suite of works in a variety of media—sculpture, photography, video, and print. The show was installed in two rooms, one of which basked in primarily natural light while the other was dark enough to accommodate an atmospheric video installation. Both settings demonstrated the artist's skill at commanding space and context with an economy of means. The placement of each object also appeared to have been carefully considered, even if much of the work depended on impulse.

Included were several sculptures based on niches, porches, and pedestals, most of them mixing sturdy materials (drywall, plywood) with more ephemeral ones (glass, fishing line, Mylar). Others, the sculptures' bases or supports—their rough seams deliberately exposed and sawhorse forms consciously repeated—are integral to their effect. In the gallery's lighter room, a rigging arrangement of five-standing screens made from lightweight brass-and-gold emergency blankets housed and connected a number of individual works. The ability to successfully utilize such unorthodox materials is one of Selzer's strengths, and in spite of their evident flimsiness, the objects and their display mechanism immediately commanded the room.

In portrait looking in (all works 2005), Selzer uses a V-shaped arrangement of screens to showcase a hand-carved wooden structure that resembles a canoe standing on end. The combination of elements formed a shrine of sorts, the reflective sheet summoning a low-rest, quasi-religious magic. Adjacent screens further subdivided the room, creating a narrow passageway in which Selzer placed two other works. One, *three birds*, is a small plaster blob in which three beer-bottle caps imprinted with images of lovel are embedded, and which sits on a shelf of unfinished drywall. The other, *portrait entitled*, is a large color photograph of Henriette Wyrill's studio in San Francisco, New Mexico, other shots of which form the basis of a handsome artist's book given away at the gallery. Each of these was subtly altered by its proximity to the shimmering screens, the ordinary function of which is to absorb or deflect heat but here served to absorb or deflect the viewer's gaze. Nearby was pair of workhorses, two elegant steel forms akin to the titular workshop mainstays. That one of these stands on its four legs while the other has apparently toppled over doesn't undercut either the sturdiness of their construction or their sleek surfaces' reference to Minimalist sculpture.

In the gallery's second room were three other works, the most striking of which was *horizon, drawing in blue*, a minimalist structure roughly constructed from drywall with a sheet of blue glass inclining toward the viewer at a formidably sharp angle. Close inspection reveals that the glass is anchored by a smaller piece of darker glass wedged beneath it and by two nearly invisible strands of nylon thread. It seems about to crash to the floor yet

remains perfectly poised, demonstrating an intoxicating tension that pervades Selzer's entire enterprise.

—Glen Helfand

LOS ANGELES

LIZ CRAFT PERES PROJECTS

"Habit"

I imagine that this was a common response to Liz Craft's new sculptures, a gang of, as the press release put it, "shaky dudes" hobnobbing, gathering, idling, and generally hanging around. The figures look like the spawns of Cousin Itt and R. Crumb's 1967 *Keep on Truckin'* guy. In southern California, the word "dude" isn't gender specific, and all that "hair" serves only to exclude somatic markers of gender. With their skinny, dingy pink arms and bulbous, flaccid shoulders, Craft's brawlers are puzzling, but she's also taking on some issues that are weightier than it might appear at first glance.

Craft is never not crafty in her deployment of materials, so it would be dumb to miss the "inappropriateness" of using immortal, monumental bronze for such a seemingly cartoonish endeavor. What happens if we consider her figures in light of Rodin's *Monument to Balzac*, (1895–98, a crux of modernism) Rodin planned his monument as a nude, but then draped Balzac in the monk's robe he frequently wore when writing, thereby abstracting the author's body into a concealed force without specific articulation and focusing attention on the monk's head. In 1979,

Shane Aslan Selzer

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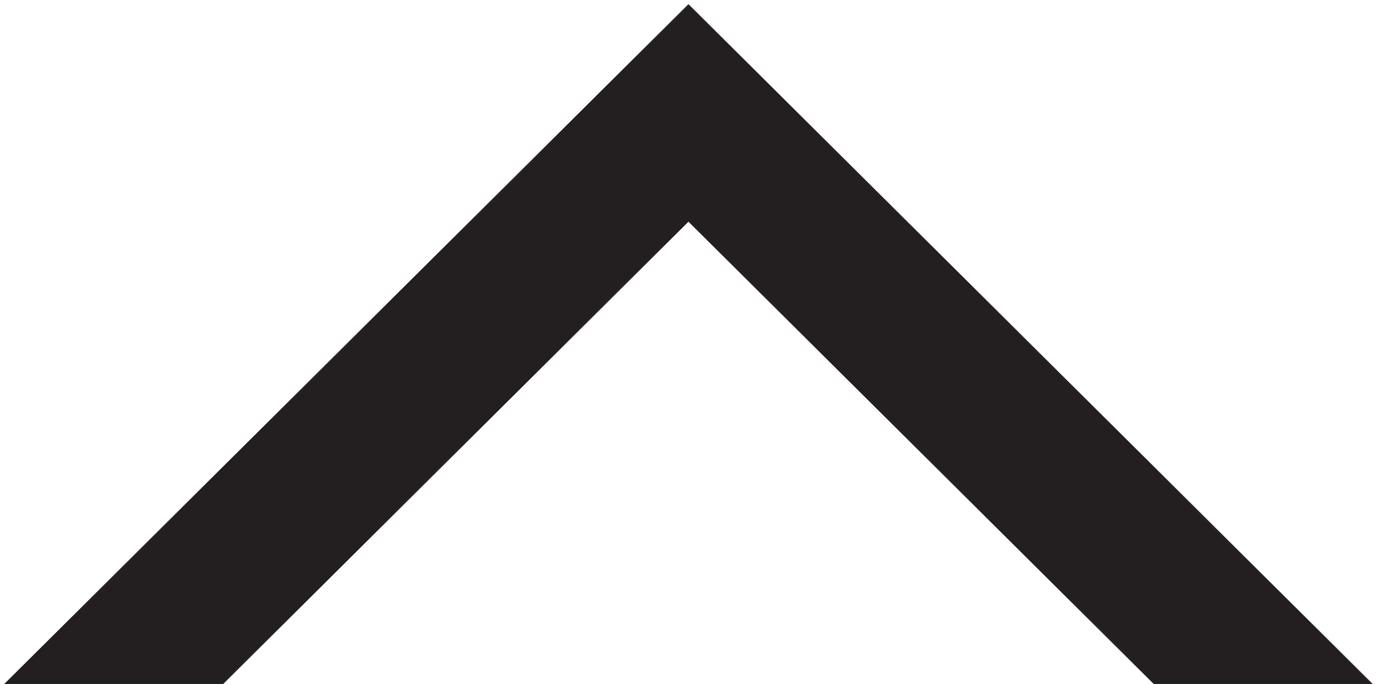
Included were several sculptures based on niches, perches, and pedestals, most of them mixing sturdy materials (drywall, plywood) with more ephemeral ones (glass, fishing line, Mylar). Often, the sculptures' bases or supports—their rough seams deliberately exposed and sawhorse forms consciously repeated—are integral to their effect. In the gallery's lighter room, a zigzag arrangement of free-standing screens made from lightweight silver-and-gold emergency blankets housed and connected a number of individual works. The ability to successfully utilize such unorthodox materials is one of Selzer's strengths, and in spite of their evident flimsiness, the objects and their display mechanism immediately commanded the room.

In *portrait looking in* (all works 2005), Selzer uses a V-shaped arrangement of screens to showcase a hand-carved wooden structure that resembles a canoe standing on end. The combination of elements formed a shrine of sorts, the reflective silver summoning a low-rent, quasi-religious magic. Adjacent screens further subdivided the room, creating a narrow passageway in which Selzer placed two other works. One, *three birds*, is a small plaster blob in which three beer-bottle caps imprinted with images of fowl are embedded, and which sits on a shelf of unfinished drywall. The other, *portrait untitled*, is a large color photograph of Henriette Wyeth's studio in San Patricio, New Mexico, other shots of which form the basis of a handsome artist's book given away at the gallery. Each of these was subtly altered by its proximity to the glimmering screens, the ordinary function of which is to absorb or deflect heat but here served to absorb or deflect the viewer's gaze. Nearby was *pair of workhorses*, two elegant steel forms akin to the titular workshop mainstays. That one of these stands on its four legs while the other has apparently toppled over doesn't undercut either the sturdiness of their construction or their sleek surfaces' reference to Minimalist sculpture.

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—Glen Helfand

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CMA Stories

Get to Know Town Hall Panelist Shane Aslan Selzer

CIVICKIDS,Interviews | October 19, 2018

CIVICKIDS





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CMA is hosting a Town Hall on Sunday, October 21 featuring **Shane Aslan Selzer** and her son **Sekou Ross-Selzer** as panelists. Shane is an artist, writer and organizer whose practice develops micro-communities where artists can expand on larger social issues such as exchange, critique and failure. Get to know her below!

What do you learn from working with young artists?

Working with young artists is always inspiring. Kids are often fearless in how they visualize the world and harness their imaginations. I learn so much from young artists about my own curiosity and the ways I pursue it.

What impact do you think kids will have on the future?

A lot of the kids I know are fiercely committed to creating a kinder, more empathetic society that protects our resources and each other.

What advice do you have for a young artist?

Keep Going. Keep Working. Stay open to new experiences and new points of view.

What is the benefit of making art with other people?

When I make work with other people we are connected through the work we make. It forces me to articulate my own point of view and asks me to consider other perspectives.

What is your definition of a collective?

When people come together to work collaboratively on an issue or a project. This generates a greater amount of energy that can grow a project beyond the individual.





Shane Aslan Selzer is an artist who is the founding editor of the Social Action Archive Committee (SAAC), a flexible group of researchers developing new projects using dormant archives. SAAC is currently developing a new project with Visual AIDS in New York. Selzer is exhibiting new collaborative work this fall at Tabakalera in San Sebastian, Spain. Selzer is the Co-Editor of What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art (SUNY Press, 2014) and a part time faculty member in the Fine Arts Department at Parsons School for Design, The New School University. Her work is featured in CMA's current exhibition "Art & Activism: Drawing the Line." Learn more at shaneaslanselzer.format.com.

This program is supported, in part, by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts with support of Governor Andrew Cuomo, and public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. CIVICKIDS is sponsored by Google.



CMA Stories

**“Parenthood changed my life and therefore it has become an integral part of how I approach my work.” —
5 Minutes with Artist Shane Aslan Selzer**

CIVICKIDS,Interviews | September 25, 2019



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Artist, writer, and organizer **Shane Aslan Selzer** is an artist whose practice engages micro-communities to expand on larger social entanglements such as critical exchange, critique, and failure. In the past year, Selzer's collaborative video work has been exhibited at Tabakalera in San Sebastian, Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster, and Julia Stoschek Collection in Berlin. Selzer is the founding editor of the Social Action Archive Committee (SAAC), whose work has been exhibited at University Art Museum, Albany NY, and the Children's Museum of the Arts. SAAC is currently developing a new project with The Carl George/Ross Laycock/Felix Gonzalez-Torres Archive at Visual AIDS in New York while in residency at Triangle Arts Association, Governor's Island, NY. Selzer is the Co-Editor of, *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art* (SUNY Press, 2014), and part-time faculty at Parsons, The New School for Design.

In light of CMA's 30th anniversary CIVICKIDS campaign, which fosters civic engagement and shared community pride through art-making, we endeavored to find out more about our neighbors on Governors Island and understand their varied approaches to working with civically engaged children.



CMA: Let's start by telling us about your practice.

SAS: My practice always aims to incorporate and support the realities of my lived experience. I primarily work with archives as a way to learn from what's happened before me and connect it to strategies for moving forward. Parenthood changed my life and therefore it has become an integral part of how I approach my work.

I will be on a public panel about Caretaking in the Archive at The Center on October 2, 2019 speaking about my work with Visual AIDS and the stakes of bringing private and personal documents into the public.

CMA: Why a family bike ride?

SAS: When Triangle Arts offered me a residency, I told them that it would need to be focused towards both Sekou and my needs and summer ambitions. One of the goals Sekou had for the residency was to learn to ride a bicycle. Governors Island is a unique place in NYC for bike riding because there are no cars and the pavement is smooth and flat. We practiced a few times and it didn't quite click. Then, we invited Sekou's good friend Rime out to the island, and Rime really encouraged Sekou to pedal fast and keep up with him! It totally worked and was an incredible day of joy and fun for all of us.

Sekou and many of his friends and cousins helped us make the cyanotypes. Some of the objects you can see in the images were gifts from classmates or treasures found on the playground or the walk to school. We wanted to bring everyone together to celebrate what we made, but when we talked about it, the idea of an exhibition didn't feel very fun to Sekou. One thing I've been thinking a lot about is the developmental transition that happens around ages 6-8 from interior magic play towards exterior experiential play in the world. Many cultures make note of this transition, an acknowledgment of all the competencies a child has acquired. We decided to focus on bike riding as an example of this and share our excitement about this experience with new and old friends. Of course this led to difficult conversations about who can and can't ride a bike and how to make the event

accessible for people with different skills and abilities. We tried to focus on human-powered machines, bikes, scooters, strollers, wheelchairs, ways to move yourself or another body. The ride started at the Triangle Arts Studio so people could see our cyanotypes without that being the main focus. We rode to the big slides and spent time moving with gravity before riding back to the ferry.



CMA: Would you say that being in a creative environment helps kids deal with difficult conditions in the outside world or even interpersonally?

SAS: Objects hold stories, but can also be surrogates, placeholders for human experiences, so they can be much less complicated to speak to directly. With art, looking is encouraged, and questions are always good. There is no right way to think or feel about an artwork, so it helps us understand our own perspective while sharing

someone else's point of view.



CMA: Any advice on having difficult conversations with children?

SAS: Active listening is such an important tool for parenting. No topic is off-limits. Sekou should feel confident that he can ask me (as his parent) about anything that comes up. Sekou always knows when I'm listening and when I'm distracted. I usually try to ask questions to prompt further elaboration from him and I always try to use the basic principles of nonviolent communication. I use this tool kit with my graduate students at Parsons in group critiques and I find that it works well for young children too. It's something that gets easier with practice, like most skills.

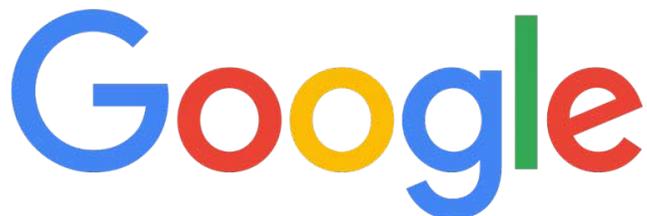
CMA: What do you mean by nonviolent communication?

SAS: Nonviolent communication starts with learning to separate the kinds of speech

we use in difficult conversations. Direct observations are the starting point. What did you see, hear, etc? Next comes feelings. How did you feel when that was happening? Then comes thoughts. What do you think about what happened? Thoughts are where analysis and judgment come into play. It's where things get complicated quickly and conversations can go sideways. Sometimes it's good for me to slow this part down and return to observations and feelings. The last piece is the requests and action. Getting in the habit of knowing the difference between observations, feelings, thoughts, and actions helps us communicate more clearly with people across our differences.

Learn more at www.shaneaslanseizer.com and www.triangleartsnyc.org

This program is supported, in part, by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts with support of Governor Andrew Cuomo, and public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. CIVICKIDS is sponsored by Google.



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