

what we want is free
CRITICAL EXCHANGES IN RECENT ART

SECOND EDITION

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NO LONGER NORMAL

CRITICAL EXCHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF ART

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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

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, 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 meaningful) 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 friendings and unfriendings, 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 crowdsourced 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 protestors 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 "Framgmented 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.

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FROM MARKETS TO LOBBIES
CONSIDERATIONS OF OBJECTS,
EXCHANGES, AND VALUE

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