

REGIFT: Circulation and Value

Regift began, funny enough, from a petty irritation. Sometimes these are the best sources of inspiration—not grand themes, but small, persistent annoyances. An acquaintance kept giving me blatantly obvious regifts for Christmas. What bothered me wasn't so much her supposed gifts as the feeling that these were worse than getting nothing at all. Nothing would have been fine. Her chain of regifts felt like something dumped on me: obligation disguised as generosity.

This left me with two options: either to confront the regifter or to feign gratitude. Our relationship devolved into a perverse pantomime. This frustration sparked my inquiry: regifting is about more than objects; it also entails the psychological economies and social hierarchies embedded in the act of giving and receiving.

This also got me thinking not just about gifts, but also about the language around them. I bridle at the term *gifted*, as in, "this was gifted to me." Why not just say *given*? Giving is active; a gift is an object. Once something is given, it becomes a gift, although it might be given again. But you can't really say *regave*. These shades of meaning say something about objectification and the nature of exchange.

Because *Regift* opened shortly after the 2009 stock market crash, people tended to see the show through that lens. But Piper Marshall and I had been working on the exhibition well before the crash, and we were more concerned with artists whose works interrupted the normative sequence of production, exhibition, and sales, artists who somehow short-circuited this sequence through gift logic.

George Bataille's distinction between restrictive and general economies informed our approach to *Regift*. Restrictive economy centers on accumulation, zero-sum logic, and keeping score. General economy concerns circulation and expenditure. For the latter, Bataille looked to Native American cultures. Peace pipes, for example, were meant to circulate, not to be hoarded. Bataille, however, was especially drawn to the later stages of potlatch, where contact with commodity culture, i.e., the French fur trade, distorted this ritual practice into spectacular carnivals of destruction. Potlatch, however, had previously functioned as a symbolic—and practical—means of resolving conflicts. That, as a result of colonialism, it escalated into excess is telling.

The tension between circulation and accumulation relates directly to art. Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (USA Today)* was an obvious touchstone.¹ I was especially happy to include his 300 lb. candy pour for that reason. I vividly remember going to his 1995 Guggenheim survey and seeing viewers grab handfuls

of candy and sheets from his paper stacks because they were “free,” only later to jettison everything in the overflowing restroom receptacles at the top. No one wanted to schlep all this stuff afterward. Yet, this apparent wastefulness shows how his work could register its specific context and expose contradictions between desire and consumption. For that reason, the Guggenheim should have probably let the candy pours and paper stacks run out instead of replenishing them, leaving viewers with just wall labels.

A similar dynamic appears in Mike Kelley’s *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*.² The piece comprised a hodgepodge of hand-knit items, which Mike found at swap meets and thrift stores. Since I visited him while he was making this piece, it felt familiar. But when I learned the cost of insuring the work alone made it too expensive for us to include in the show, it came as a bit of a shock. What interested me especially was how *More Love Hours...* reflected Thorstein Veblen’s critique of surplus labor, namely how excess or wasted effort—in this case, handicraft versus industrial production—can become a marker of class distinction. Mike, however, was primarily concerned with the burden of gift-giving in a more Catholic register: that handmade gifts create indebtedness and guilt: love hours that can never be repaid.

The current revival of fiber arts opens up alternate readings that inhere in Kelley’s piece. My recent Barnard students, for example, embrace embroidery, knitting, and handwork now with a different inflection, perhaps to defy the tyranny of digital culture and screens. Moreover, that handicraft can be therapeutic is something which Veblen’s critique fails to account for.

In another vein, Sophie Calle’s *The Birthday Ceremony* (1980)³ featured birthday gifts she never used—although, ironically, she did use these gifts to produce this work. Nonetheless, her refusal to use them as intended undermines the most basic expectations of giving and receiving. In this way, her accumulated array of presents, encased in pristinely glass vitrine presents a deadpan caricature of restrictive economy. *The Birthday Ceremony* also implies a curious relation to the readymade.

The very term “readymade” represses the labor component of commodity production, suggesting that commodities are simply there for the taking. Through relational esthetics, however, the readymade has morphed into its dialectical opposite. Artists have taken the readymade off the pedestal and put it back into circulation. And, by exhibiting products made by incarcerated workers as ostensible readymades, Cameron Rowland explicitly forces labor back into the picture, reminding you how products you ordinarily might take for granted derive from exploitation.⁴ This leads to an unnerving question. Is the surplus value extracted from the working class otherwise supposed to be considered some kind of “gift?”

Altogether, the underlying tension between circulation and accumulation, generosity and obligation, use and exchange lies at the center of *Regift*. Since political economy especially has become more precarious than it was even in 2009, questions of value, labor, affordability, and institutional stability have become ever more urgent. And in that context, gift-giving starts to look different, too. The new *Regift*, recast partly as a benefit, folds one kind of exchange logic into another. Gift giving converges with fundraising, circulation with institutional needs. Perhaps, in a collective sense, generosity cannot — and should not— be excluded from our conventional understanding of exchange; it may be inseparable from essential social interaction.

¹ Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)* (1990), 300 lbs. of candies wrapped in red, silver, and blue cellophane. Viewers can take candies from a pile installed in a corner of the exhibition space. The candies can be replenished. The 2009 *Regift* installation of this work featured candies purchased from the company Candy Favorites. The piece is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

² Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987), a work in two parts. The first is a 6x7' canvas overlaid with afghans and stuffed fabric toys. The second is a small circular table with a wooden top and a metal base, holding wax candles and dried corn. The work is in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

³ Sophie Calle, *The Birthday Ceremony* (1980), glass vitrine with assorted objects, 67 x 33 ¼ x 21".

To insure that her friends would not forget her birthday, Calle decided that every year, if possible, on 9 October, to hold a dinner party where the number of guests corresponded to her age. In addition, she asked one of her guests to invite a stranger. Calle ended this ritual in 1993. She never used the presents she received on these occasions, choosing instead to present them in glass vitrines.

⁴ See Cameron Rowland's 2016 exhibition at Artist's Space, 91020000. The show included, amongst other elements, oak benches, leveler rings for manhole covers, an office desk, and fire retardant suits—all produced by incarcerated workers. Instead of selling these items, Rowland rents them at the prisoners' hourly payrate. The Museum of Modern Art is currently renting many of these products.