

"Regift"

Swiss Institute

By Brian Sholis ☞

Lewis Hyde asserts, in the introduction to his book *The Gift* (1983), that "works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy." Recent contemporary art can be accused of focusing on the former to the detriment of the latter. Hyde's subsequent insistence that "a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art" appears to ignore or be at odds with the realities of a commercial market flying high, as it was recently, or laid low, as it seems to be now. Yet his counsel is a welcome reminder that, no matter our commercial concerns, we must also acknowledge other ways of valuing art and pay heed to its other functions. This group exhibition, organized by artist John Miller, suggested something similar by presenting artworks that engage the subject of gift exchange.

"Regift" brought together two dozen artists and art collectives. Although a few, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, explicitly spotlight the questions raised by the show's topic, most are not known to be particularly concerned with it. The diversity, however, made up for what some of the artworks lacked in gift-exchange sophistication. Sam Durant's *American Hospitality (biological)*, 2006, a folded blanket and a bottle of Jack Daniel's resting on a pedestal, is a caustic meditation on the ends toward which gifts can be used. The work refers to soldiers (a British commander in the eighteenth century, the US army in the nineteenth) who reportedly distributed smallpox-infected blankets to American Indians. Durant's sculpture resides at the opposite end of a conceptual spectrum from Maria Eichhorn's overly earnest *Gift, Regift*, 2009, which facilitates a Secret Santa-like exchange of unwanted gifts submitted by the public, or Sylvie Fleury's *wan I Love You: February 14, 2009*, for which she instructed Miller to find a kitschy Valentine's Day gift and install it in the gallery. (The checklist playfully credits the teddy bear as courtesy Rite Aid, among others.)



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Two artworks stood out by frankly addressing the power of the artist to change the value of an object by designating it as art. Jim Shaw's *Sketch for Museum Installation*, 2009, is composed of the drawing for a 1940 comic that he gave to his mother; a fruitcake box like the ones his father sells on behalf of a men's club; and a text that outlines a proposal for an art installation that would link the two and, in the process, fiscally benefit his parents. The complicated entwinement of gift exchange with personal relationships and the obligations they entail is given a thorough workout in Shaw's scheme. Something similarly fascinating is found in Leigh Ledare's proposal that New York's Museum of Modern Art assume responsibility for a family graveyard plot by accepting it as a gift from the artist.

As a critic, Miller has written about several of the show's artists, including Mike Kelley, whose giveaway iron-on T-shirt decals attempt to undermine the profits of a company that appropriated one of his drawings without permission. As an artist, Miller shares galleries with the majority of the others included here, a fact that points to yet another, less tangible yet no less important type of gift exchange: the productive, informal back-and-forth between artists who help each other further their individual practices. Recent exhibitions at Anton Kern Gallery and Andrew Kreps Gallery have made affinities among artists a structuring conceit; it was a pleasure to discover them here more subtly underpinning a rumination on a closely related theme.

—*Brian Sholis*