

Art Barter Asks, What Would You Give for Art? Your Summer Home? Sexual Favors? A Kidney?

By Arsalan Mohammad



LONDON— Are French lessons a fair swap for a Tracey Emin original artwork? Does Mat Collishaw reckon a limited-edition print is of equal value to a holiday for two at a luxury Mediterranean resort? Can contemporary art — so intrinsically tied up with financial speculation and fluctuating markets — be stripped of all its connotations and survive on its own merits? Last year, two young Londoners decided to find out.

Alix Janta and Lauren Jones launched Art Barter in 2009 with a show in the British capital that featured work by 50 artists, including unattributed pieces by Emin, Collishaw, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Gavin Turk, and Polly Morgan, alongside college graduates and rising stars. This was an exhibition with a novel twist: work was not only displayed anonymously, it was also available only via barter, for a product or service the artist deemed equally valuable.

The show was a massive success, with well over half the pieces on display ending up in the hands of happy hagglers. A second exhibition, in the perpetually cash-strapped city of Berlin, followed to equal acclaim. And as of yesterday, a new iteration of the experiment has taken up residence in New York's NP Contemporary Art Center on Chrystie Street, where it will continue to tempt bargain-hunters through the 12th.

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The idea for the project came with the downturn in the economy, which brought a resurgence of old-fashioned notions of thrift and fair trade, which in turn outshone lusts for reckless spending. "Early in 2009," Art Barter co-founder Lauren Jones said, "it became apparent that there was a shift in how people were getting hold of what they wanted or needed in life. We wanted to create an environment where the artist once again would hold complete control and where the viewer always had a chance to acquire the works on display."

This democratizing concept of bringing art within the reach of ordinary enthusiasts quickly took off in London. At the inaugural Art Barter event, neither organizers nor artists were quite sure what to expect. Derision, failure, or mockery? But the final results were gratifying: Artists closed deals on well over half the bids placed, Emin was delighted with her course of French lessons, Collishaw equally so with his Mediterranean holiday. Jones and Janta felt hugely encouraged.

"There was real interest," Jones said. "Partly that was to do with some of the artists we had involved and partly with the concept itself. But the offers were really varied: a lot of holidays and dinner invitations, but then some more obscure ones, such as a kidney. Someone even offered their ex-girlfriend."

The eccentric, yet high caliber of bids brought out the cheerily irreverent London art crowd in droves, leaving guests and participants highly pleased. "I think it is the perfect project for our times," sculptor Polly Morgan, who recently staged a show at London's Haunch of Venison gallery, said. "People have grown tired of the excessively commercial nature of the art world, it can be hard for young artists to be judged on merit rather than on their commercial potential."

This summer's Berlin show reflected the city's penchant for sexually-charged naughtiness, with bids including "a blow job without conversation;" "Aperitif, Dinner, Orgy With 3 Girls And 3 Grams Of Coke And Champagne And All The Extras In A Horny Location;" and "A night with my husband!" But the Art Barter team have slightly different expectations for the New York exhibition.

"We've learned that smaller pieces that are easier for the viewer to imagine in their home," Jones said. " And as they generally have lower production costs, the artist is more likely to want to exchange. For the New York show, the majority of the pieces are wall pieces with a couple of sculptures and video works also." The exhibition will feature pieces by an assortment of local names, including Poppy de Villeneuve, Michael Joo, Leigh Ledare, Terence Koh, Mick Rock, and Sasha Vine, plus dozens more.