



Art Barter

NP Contemporary Art Center, New York

I've been thinking a lot about clichés and well-worn expressions this week. You know that one "bought it for a song"? The real problem with that one is that it asserts that a song is basically valueless, but then again, I guess that depends on how you feel about music. I thought about that expression specifically because of a project called Art Barter, where songs have quite literally been offered in exchange for works of art.

There's been a lot of discussion about the art market and alternative forms of currency recently; a sagging economy can do that. What's set Art Barter apart in that discussion since their first event just over a year ago is that they are fun. Works by well-known artists are hung anonymously next to those by lesser-known artists. Barter offers – which can be anything but a monetary offer – if not handed in anonymously themselves, are collected on a pin board for anyone to read. While concepts of value and exchange can and do remain at the forefront, in this completely leveled environment, creativity joins these more serious concepts at the center of conversation, where it should be. Collective creativity leads to change, and as Art Barter seems to understand very well, there's no reason we shouldn't have fun in the process.

2 weeks before the opening of their first event in the US, I caught up with Art Barter's founders, Lauren Jones and Alix Janta, to ask about how the project has grown, and what they have planned for the future.

What led to the first art barter in London? How did you arrive at the idea?

Early in 2009 it became apparent that there was a shift in how people were getting hold of what they wanted or needed in life. Projects such as the free shop and Freecycle were prevalent and the exchange of skills between friends and businesses were on the rise.

This inspired Art Barter, as well as the Burning Man festival in the Nevada Desert and the RCA's secret postcard auction, where nothing is for sale but everything is up for barter. 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.

How have you chosen the artists?

We only select artists based in the city where the show is taking place. The selected artists are at varying levels in their careers. It is important for us to have established artists alongside emerging ones and some still in school, or completely unknown in the art market!

In London, we started by talking to friends and artists that we knew and from

there we got a really great response and positive reaction, we then started to contact bigger and better known artists who seemed to be just as in to the idea as the younger and less established guys. We really had no idea that it would be such a huge show, we had 50 artists and it was the first time that either of us had done anything like that before.

After 2 Art Barter events in London, 1 in Berlin, and now New York, has there been any difference in how the public or artists have responded to the project in these different cities?

I would say that at the first edition of Art Barter in November 2009, the public was really intrigued and excited by the new concept, but at the same time a little shy, or thinking they had nothing to offer. For the second edition the public became more confident, probably knowing what has been exchanged for the artworks in the past and really serious and interesting offers were made.

London and Berlin have both been great experience in terms of meeting incredible artists, who mostly became good friends. Being in NY, it's just about starting from scratch and discovering this interesting but very diverse scene. Artists here seem really curious and excited by this new concept.

Visitors to art barter can offer anything they want for the art – as long as it's not money, of course. How have people reacted to that? Do you think it's been a challenge for people bartering for the art to come up with a non-monetary offer?

I think the visitors really enjoy it! They have a chance to acquire artworks that usually couldn't afford just by being creative on what they will put for an offer. We received a crazy amount of offers for a three-day event. In London, they were over 2000 offers for 50 artworks. So far we have had a success rate of over 70% of the art works being exchanged with the public.

What barter offers have stuck out for you? Has there been anything particularly interesting, amazing, or just bizarre?

Some artists seem to go for the romantic offers, like Haralampi Oroschakoff. He got offered a gallop on St Andrews beach of white sands on beautiful horse and as soon as he heard the word horse, he decided to go for it! Or Noriaki Hattori. At the time he was a student in his last year at Chelsea. He received many great offers and decided to exchange with a seven year old called Oscar who offered him a remote toy he had made.

The offers were really varied, a lot of holidays and dinner invitations but also more obscure offers such as a kidney and someone even offered their ex-girlfriend! Some were just hilarious, but in the end most of the artworks were exchanged.

What's next for art barter?

We have a long list of places where we would love to see other art barter events taking place. Cities like Tokyo, Istanbul, Los Angeles, Beijing, very inspiring places and really interesting artist scene that we can't wait to discover. We would love to get the community of artists bigger and eventually to launch our online platform featuring the work of artists around

the world.

Art Barter has put a lot of fun into the idea of alternative exchange, but we don't live in a fully barter society. At least, not yet. Because no money exchanges hands, and even if you'd want to, you just can't put a commission on remote controlled toys or a kidney, Art Barter covers its operating costs through donations. If you will be unable to visit the event in person, but still would like to support this and future Art Barter events, information is available on their website.

December 9th – 12th, 2010 at NP Contemporary Art Space, 131 Chrystie Street, New York, 10002. 12 noon – 6pm.

More information about the project and the upcoming event can be found at www.artbarter.co.uk.

Although you won't be able to barter your stay, you'll certainly be able to warm your art eyes up at the [Greenwich Hotel](#), itself home to many original pieces of art, most by Robert De Niro's father. It's also just a 20 minute walk from Art Barter, so take advantage of that too.

Text by Melissa Frost Dec 2010