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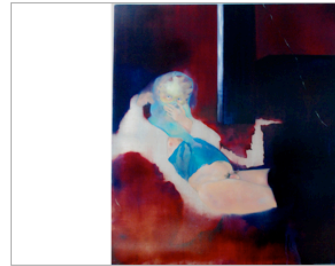
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## Art Barter at the Rag Factory

The concept show that intends to de-commodifying the art market at the Rag Factory off Brick Lane



Sonia Zhuravlyova

There was no ruffling of banknotes or glimmer of diamond rings to be seen at **Art Barter** in the Rag Factory just off Brick Lane this weekend. Despite the presence of works by the likes of Gavin Turk, Tracey Emin and Gary Hume, the only acceptable currency was things or skills visitors were willing to trade in exchange for the displayed artworks.

Fifty established and upcoming artists displayed works, which ranged from oil paintings, photography to light installation, but did not feature name tags – so the viewers could appreciate them for their aesthetic value and not for the artist's superstar status. If something took your fancy, you wrote down the artwork's number and what you were willing to trade for it and pinned it to the wall and after the three-day exhibition, the forms were sent to the artist for them to choose from.

The brainchild of curators Lauren Jones and Alix Janta, the exhibition takes a stab at de-commodifying the art market. "We want to make art available to a more diverse crowd, not just people with disposable income," says Jones.

Oliver Clegg, one of the participating artists who has exhibited all around London and at the Royal Academy Summer Show in 2008, was pleased to take part in Art Barter: "It has a non-commercial objective, there's no obligation to sell and the whole thing is quite informal." When asked what he would like to receive in exchange for his work, Clegg admitted that he would like "lots of free meals in nice restaurants or a holiday."

The fun thing about this exhibition was trying to work out which work belonged to which YBA, but I wonder if any of the participating artists decided to play a prank and submit a work in someone else's style. Regardless, it was nice to see the artists displayed on an even playing field.

I was a little dismayed though to find that reading what people would barter for the artworks to be more entertaining than the artworks themselves. They ran the gamut from free piano lessons to the offer of someone's beard, a painted wooden horse's head, a case of Sicilian oranges and, rather enticingly (or not), naked cleaning. I'm sure there will be an acceptable offer in there for each artist, though perhaps it's not entirely what Clegg had in mind.

**Art Barter** ran from 27th – 29th November at the Rag Factory on 16–18 Heneage Street. For more information see [their website](#).

Zoe Troughton

I would like to offer "my foreskin".

Alix Janta and Lauren Jones' **Art Barter** interrogated notions of value and worth in art, and demanded an answer from its audience, signed, dated and placed in a sealed box. The above was a contractually binding bid for a piece of work exhibited.

Entering the space as an anonymous gallery goer I was faced with two rooms of untitled work by anonymous artists. Despite the absence of marked identities I have never felt more surrounded by vitality and individuality.

The lack of plaques inscribed by some omniscient being, displaying carefully distilled information, left the art itself to ooze personality; and instead of reading predetermined contextualisation, I became immersed in reading colour, texture, and form. I thus found the effervescent presence of the artists embedded in their work, rather than in a lacklustre history of their training.

I felt liberated; emancipated from the draw of swarms huddled by the eminent work of extolled artists, I was free to pass by anything that didn't speak to me personally. The exhibition thereby relocated art in the visual, the aesthetic, the emotive, rather than in the realm of pecuniary success, status, and worth.

This transformed me from a passive viewer, lethargically swallowing the didactic gallery experience, into an engaged participant in the definition and valuation of the work. I felt invited into a relationship with the artists' various expressions, as my role and responsibility to decipher was no longer asphyxiated by given expositions. My willing laziness in reading artistic merit was shaken off by the avoidance of prescribed meaning.

The porous boundaries between creating and viewing immediately allowed me a sense of ownership, before I had even considered what I might offer in order to secure the work for myself. This decision in itself allowed me a degree of self expression; a piece of me for a piece of you.

The content of the exhibition ranged from painted portraits, to fluorescent scrawls, from intricate wire sculpture, to illuminated images of anuses (which were almost floral from a distance!) I was particularly drawn to *number 49*, and unless you went to the exhibition that means nothing to you. But this, for me, was the heart of the event. The value of *number 49*, whether artistic, aesthetic, political, functional (I could go on), was defined by me, for me; I cannot enlighten you with an objective assessment of meaning or worth. So what did I offer? Certainly not my foreskin.