



Or Best Offer -These artists will trade their work for anything except money

By Esther Semo
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What's a piece of art really worth? A month-long holiday in Brazil; a year of therapy sessions; a personal wake up call every morning; maybe a kidney? It's time to find out. From Dec. 9 through 12, Art Barter, an “exchange between artist and the public,” say its curators, is coming to New York—to NP Contemporary Art Center on Chrystie Street, to be exact. There are more than 30 artists contributing work for the New York version of the exhibition, which has previously taken place in London and Berlin. The artists include sculptors, photographers, painters and graphic artists whose work range in both style and price level.

The exhibition, in which pieces of art are exchangeable for anything other than money, is appealing to some local artists thanks to its unconventional methods of payment. “It sounds like a fun idea to trade in your art for something valuable that is not money” says East Village-based photographer Asger Carlsen who has a piece in the exhibition. “It's something that is in fashion photography a lot. Quite often you get offered a pair of jeans to shoot an image” notes Carlsen. Elizabeth Gregory Gruen, a visual artist also participating, is quick to point out, “the notion of bartering has been around forever—it has always been apart of our human history.”

While it may be the norm for up-and-comers to work sans fee as a means of publicity, big name artists involved in Art Barter, including Carlsen, who has recently shown at the Open

House Gallery, and Tim Barber, creator of Tinyvices, an online gallery and image archive, often sell their work for thousands of dollars. But it doesn't seem to be a deterrent.

"I think it is acceptable now because everyone is struggling," says Carlsen. "It's not really a good way to make a living in the long run. But it is very suitable for this time. Because you know, no one has money... it's very current."

Gruen adds, "The other issue is understanding and respecting copyright. There is a whole generation that does not know or care about this." When asked if she would be comfortable accepting bartering as a new means of payment. Gruen says "As an addition to the business, sure, why not. As the norm, no."

The curators of Art Barter, Lauren Jones and Alix Janta say that the idea came about in early 2009 when they realized there was a shift in how people were getting hold of what they needed and wanted. Free pop-up stores started appearing everywhere along with markets solely dedicated to the forgotten notion of multilateral trade, so it seems only fitting that this trend would filter through to art.

As there are no profits, Jones and Janta rely on investors' support and donations. Eventually, they hope to create a barter website similar to the exhibitions, but on a more global platform in order to further the accessibility of fine art. While the artists involved have the option to accept or decline the proposed method of payment, the previous Art Barter exhibitions have had a high success rate of over 70% of the art works being exchanged. The exchanges are made after the exhibition is over and the artists have chosen whether to accept or decline the offers made.

Although anyone is able to bid whatever they have in exchange for a work, the name of the artist whose work one is bidding on is not made public. Jones and Janta specify that they kept the works' creator unspecified in order to "make the viewer value the artworks outside of the art market."

So, while some may fear that initiatives that exempt monetary value from the art world pose a threat to the world itself, it's undeniable that the purpose of art is to be seen and interpreted. Whether you like a piece or not, it should be your right to see it and if you like it, have the chance of owning it. Any exhibition or idea that takes the hype out of art and makes it accessible to a new audience has to be commended. Plus, when else can you trade a human organ for a sculpture?