

What have I got to give? That's the immediate epiphany-like, self-assessment of worth which Art Barter triggers. It's a buzz worthy exhibition concept which has been hyped up with the likes of Tracy Emin, Terence Koh and Polly Morgan trading their work for French tuition, a bottle of 1926 Canadian Whisky, and a Peter Blake 'Fag Packet' print: in that order. Quite happily displayed beside them are fire-cracker graduates yet to hit the big time. The question is: which is which? As all the participating artists display their work anomalously. Launched in London with their first major show in November 2009. Since then Art Barter have held a Mini Barter (around Frieze) as well as the Berlin and NY shows. Founders Lauren Jones and Alix Janta have seen Art Barter turn from an idea to a reality in the past year. HAUS hooked up with Lauren on the dawn of 2011 when she promised "once you tap into barter, you start seeing more and more possibilities in your everyday life."

How was the move to New York in comparison to the Art Barter show in Berlin?

Berliner's offered things involving their time rather than expensive items. One woman who came in New York offered a 'conversation dinner' with her partner where they'd entertain for you, cook, talk about topics of your choice, record the whole event and then send it to you afterwards. No-one chose that but it was the kind of 'crazy' coming out of New York.

Do the trades work out in the long run?

One story that I like is Byzantia Harlow's, she got offered a place in The Kabin Collection after the London show. They lend to the National Portrait gallery and the guy who traded has become somewhat of a mentor to her. Another one was Ian Bruce who exchanged a painting for a website design. He also has a band, The Correspondants so he exchanged another piece of art work for a band website, they've built up a relationship. I've not had any negative feedback. Maybe they just don't tell us!

Sounds like the start of a movie plot.

Maybe people will make movies. [Laughs]

What do you think attracts big name artists to Art Barter?

Artists are, at no point, under any obligation so it's an experiment for them. Also a lot of artists survived through Barter before they made it big so they're revisiting that time. But they also don't know what they're going to get offered. It's quite unexpected, the kind of thrill element. When they get sent their offers after the show its like 'wow'. It's fun as well... I think the more established artists are happier to be seen on a par with the younger artists and they're very happy to be in a show with a more established artists. I think it works both ways.

So collectors are assessing the style more?

Yes, but also a lot of the established artists are trying to put in works of art that aren't very recognisable to get involved more with the whole concept of the show. But there is a mixture.

Do you barter with galleries to setup shows?

We haven't really set up anything like that. With the London show we managed to get brand sponsorship but in New York we ended up doing some thing called Kick Starter. People make pledges in exchange for different levels of prizes. It's basically people who want to support your project but they get exhibition posters or prints in return.



You're planning to let people Barter online do you think that's going to mean people loose the "connection"?

I think in a way it could really build connections much more because you're going to have this kind of dialogue worldwide. On the other hand having the show in a location means a lot of the peoples offers are people's time. Exchanging with artists is going to be harder to do worldwide so we're still thinking how we can make sure it works out.

Does the nature of the event you attract a certain style of art?

I think it's really really varied. In the New York show now we had 3-D works, massive brazen blocks, we had video works included for the first time in the show.

Art movement's trying to buy out of the art market create works like performance art is there a way to incorporate them into Art Barter?

We're planning to do a show in Shoreditch House with a lot of performance at the show but I don't think you can put a number on it and people can come and barter for it. Having said that, we did have a video work which was performance so in that way we can incorporate it.

Apart from city gallery exhibitions are there any alternative events you're looking to do?

We would love to take artists from each of the shows we've done so far and go on a big kind of Art Barter tour to the Burning Man festival which is all based around barter and also the online platform. There's so many things we want to do. I guess we're just going to push forward and make as much of it as possible happen.

Since starting Art Barter have you seen how barter elsewhere?

I definitely apply barter to my life. In New York because we didn't get sponsorship I ended up sleeping in a friend's front room in exchange for some childcare.

I'm always trying to barter with people in museums and restaurants and everything: I just love the hustle of it.

Do you see Art Barter as part of all these new movements like couch surfing? It's kind of part of your generation.

I wouldn't categorise it as part of any movement necessarily but I guess all these types of things are happening around the same time for a reason aren't they. People are broke, so you need to find another way.

When the recession is over do you think Art Barter will hold strong?

I do believe it still can evolve because it's an alternative. Not everything that comes to Art Barter is because people don't have the money it's just that it's an alternative and it's a different way and it's a new connection.

Text: Maksymilian Fus Mickiewicz. Image: Pete Wheeler, The Devil's Off My Back.