

CASHING OUT Curatorial Essay

The young people protesting in Wall Street and beyond reject this vain economic order. They have come to reclaim the future.

– David Graeber, *The Guardian*, September 25, 2011

Since September 17, 2011 hundreds of activists congregated in Zuccotti Park near Wall Street, and on the weekend of September 24, thousands more joined them. In the shadow of the Global Financial Crisis, the worldwide – and in particular, the U.S. – economy faces a dubious future crippled with debt. Sparking debate and discussion in all sectors, the Financial Crisis has found particular relevance in the Arts as sales-driven economic systems falter. With little to no support from government entities, the Arts by necessity have looked to alternative forms of economic support. And while the Arts still operate in the gallery system – and by extension, a commodity market – community-driven programs, artist-run spaces and non-profits all aim to support artists in a time of great need.

The protestors outside of Wall Street sought answers and upheaval in the name of their uncertain futures. As many more students – from all sectors, not just the Arts – face enormous debt and a failing job market, the question becomes how does one create a sustainable community in the wake of the current recession. While perhaps not a model for all sectors, we can see viable alternative and hybrid models in the Arts. In 1970, artist Robert Morris founded the Peripatetic Artists Guild. Advertised in an issue of *Artforum*, the Guild announced that Morris' services were available for commissions around the world for the wage of \$25/hour (plus travel and materials): “no project is too small or large.” While often perceived as a joke, Morris' lawyerly tone to the terms suggests otherwise. The ad speaks to Morris' attempt to quantify his *artistic* labor under the same terms as a craftsman (\$25/hour being a comparable wage for a skilled professional or master craftsman in 1970), and also points toward a need for an economic support system for artists – one independent from the art market.

Community-driven programs, artist-run spaces, and other hybrid models all seek to creative alternative methods for artists to create work and dialogues. In the current extended recession period, the art world has seen an increasing reliance on these models. The art world can be seen moving, however tentatively, away from the U.S. economy and its shadow (the increasingly volatile commercial and secondary art market).

These hybrid models are not without precedent, echoing utopian projects of the 1970's such as the Black Panther's Survival programs which included Free Breakfast for Children and the Intercommunal Youth Institute. These models also engaged with ideas tied to Marxist theoretical efforts to restructure the system. Yoshua Okon's program at SOMA Art School in Mexico City provides an alternative space for critique and dialogue. SOMA exists outside of the traditional education system giving its artists opportunity for a continued sense of community that traditional MFA programs have, while also being autonomous from the gallery/collector system.

From the first wave of alternative art spaces in the US, New Langton Arts in the Bay Area was a leader in exhibiting new media forms and involving artists in the decision making process. Judy Moran and Renny Pritikin, New Langton's first directors, took on a non-profit model of supporting artists, commissioning new works and encouraging experimentation in approaches to artmaking and curation. In addition, their programs provided funding for artists, writers, musicians and curators whose projects fell outside the often pre-determined and narrow lines of production defined by most grantmakers. Models such as these (New Langton ended in 2009) are alternative systems for artists, resisting the commodification of their works and an over-reliance of a fiscal system driving the production of work suitable for sale. These programs and the artists in *Cashing Out* are markedly different from the competitive art market and attempt to provide new models that encourage dialogue, critique, mutual support, experimentation and above all, creativity.

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