

subnote.net

Claiming the money as a public space and property we try to recode the singular value attached to the notes. Through repetition of the rituals of marking, registering and printing the money, we slowly de-alienate the money, the money becomes a material for our use, and after this transformation we see and experience it as ours. Keeping track of the way we spend it or exchange it, we try give the bills a history, a base for a possible identity.

Spending and exchanging the subnote for their normal value we deny the money an artistic value, keeping it in the realm of the monetary transaction. This realm, pure as science, is however distorted by the symbolic value attached through the image. The money has become part of a secret, it can be sublimated by the chance discovery of the image by a next party. Poetic possibilities during economic transactions.

The logic of added value, the base of our economic belief system, is ridiculed. Time has been spend, often far above the nominal value of the bill, without any direct return. The open distribution ensures that subnotes will be past throughout social or cultural barriers.

One of our main aims is to point at our own wilful misunderstanding of the economic system. About aspects of that system which are beyond discussion. How much of a myth is the economy.

In the end, of course, there is the acknowledgement of the absurd: 2,500 subnotes on 70,000,000,000 dollar bills in circulation, with an average life span of only 24 months.

Subnotes

Since November 2001 we have been printing images on the back side of the dollar bills we encounter. We print these in photochromic ink. This ink is invisible under normal light conditions, but changes to colour when exposed to uv-light. This can either be sunlight or blacklight. On the front we print the subnote logo and web address and a subnote number.

We didn't want to monopolize the images, so from the start we have invited people to create images for the backside. Sometimes these are in the form of an image from or reference to an existing project that artist has done, sometimes the image exist only on the subnote.

Together with the information from the note, like bill number, denomination, and series, we register what we printed on the note, where and when it was printed. This is all written on index cards. Each note has such an index card. When we spend the bill we register on what, when and where. This process of registration and updating information is probably the most time consuming of all.

On www.subnote.net people can access the information with their bill number and register their note and leave a message with their bill. Furthermore, all images printed on the backside can be viewed, and more information about the artists and their projects is given. Lastly, of course, more information is given about the subnote project. This information is set up to be basically informative and not theoretical or artistic. Subnote is there described as a way to reclaim and personalize money.

Performing the theme

One contemplations starting the subnote project was how to deal with the size of the United States, how to leave a trace of us during our stay and our planned road trip from Pittsburgh to California and back. Spending and printing the subnotes we created a memory of our travels. On the web site this is shown through a map pin pointing all the locations we spent the subnotes.

In order to involve more people, our first public performance involved a setup in the School of the Art's Ellis Gallery. Having the gallery for a week we set up our subnote office and continued mostly as we would have without being in the gallery. We printed and registered the money, and were fine-tuning the website. Our addition to our normal practice was the exchange of money with passers-by. We exchanged the money on a par basis, for each bill they would give us we would hand them a printed subnote, with a small card to register how to update the database with their spending information.

While exchanging subnotes in the Ellis Gallery a graduate student of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond approached us and asked whether we wouldn't want to do this project with a screen printing class he was teaching there. The group would be given the assignment to design an image for the subnotes, and we would print them together. This happened in preparation of the graduate exchange exhibition which had been planned. For the exhibition we would do an opening performance, screen-printing money with the students on the spot and exchanging subnotes with the help of some other students. The exhibition VCU had put up in Pittsburgh had been extremely classical and object oriented. This stimulated us to make an extra spectacle of the opening of the reciprocal exhibition.

Critical notes

When one of the participating students made an image "remember 9-11", a dilemma was put to us. We had never put direct political messages on the subnotes, reckoning the act of printing on the money a sufficient symbolic civil disobedience. And, both of us very much disliked the extreme patriotism and aggressiveness which filled the full political spectrum after the attack on the twin towers. However, we did not feel we should censor this student's idea. It did bring up a counter idea.

For the opening we staged the twin towers money throw. We would stand in the space, both wearing a pinstriped suit, as symbolic twins. In front of us a half circle marked by tape, behind us posters of clouds. We put ten \$1 dollar subnotes in front of us in the half circle. The first person able to throw one of their subnotes in our wide opened mouths would win the \$10 and all the money accumulated from other players. When nobody would succeed in 30 minutes, we would return the contestants their money.

We hoped that people would fold little planes from their bills. We had asked one person to start with a plane. However, regardless of our practice beforehand, his endeavour was quite unsuccessful, and inducing most other people to make little balls (or bombs) from their bills. Apart from the lack of many airplanes, the dollar throw was a big success, people screamed and shouted like regular game shows, as the twentieth contestant pulled the trick and won all the bills.

Andy Warhol Museum - money bartering

We have been invited to perform at the gala opening of the Andy Warhol Museum's new exhibition 'Andy Warhol: Obsession Possession', showcasing items from Warhol's private collection of artefacts, which number 10,000 pieces by the time of his death. Not a public opening, but a highly controlled event for the privileged who are museum donors or are willing to spend \$75 tickets. The gala opening is a kind of hyped up event to raise extra funds and give donors a kind of glamouresque feel. The Warhol liked our project as it plays with the obsession of value and collecting. Giving the elitist nature of the gala opening and the fact that the museum was refusing to pay any of the expenditures for the project, urged us to change the concept of exchanging.

Instead of exchanging at par value, we decided to make people bid for the money. We designed bid forms, on which they had to state the price they were willing to pay. In response we would set an asking price and negotiate to an agreed price. We often would set asking prices lower than face value or significantly higher. This proved to be a difficult, but very interesting proposition. A lot of people were extremely reluctant to bid on money, some didn't want to bid differently than the face value, but others refused to bid lower than it. Most didn't really know how to react when we asked less than the actual value of the currency.

This estrangement we felt as well. The environment was kind of hostile and not directly interested very much so we had to go out and actively 'sell' our product. Then came the process of bidding in which we felt, but differently from person to person, either the need to ask lower than the bid price, or feel guilty of corrupted artistic intention when asking more.

The money throw game which we performed seemed the most popular, as it was easily accessible and clear in its purposes. Though with the game as well, some people were very enthusiastic, while quite a lot of others did seem to find sacrilegious.

EBay

In only a few years eBay has become one of the quintessential American symbols, everyone trades everything on eBay. Quintessential not only in the now proverbial “then sell it at eBay” or you can get it best at eBay”. But as well in using tribal strategies like peer control and heavily controlled feedback loops. Positioning themselves as in direct relation with their users and pushing their employees in this relationship, will keeping tight control over everything which happens, eBay symbolizes the American culture in which corporate customer orientation, has taken over everyday human interaction.

On eBay we will start putting our subnotes up for auction, on a bi-weekly basis, slowly increasing the spectacle of the description, slowly including more of our ideas and places we have performed subnote. We will continue this while we are back in Europe, seeing what will how the sale of money can evolve.

Local economies and a single currency

Having been invited by a couple of Carnegie Mellon students to participate in their performance trip through Europe next summer, we have decided to use the concept of the subnote. The performance strategy will be extended, we will exchange subnotes in all the places we visit. Most importantly, the conditions for exchanging will be radically different.

We will not exchange on a par basis, but will research the average European price level for a basket of basics goods, like bread, coffee, beer, vegetables, beef and haircuts. We will then check these prices in on a very local level in shops, cafes and the likes and come up with an relative value of their Euro in relation to the official average value. People in that locality will then be able to exchange for that value.

Of course, we will have to plan to visit some more expensive as well as the poorer regions in order to sustain ourselves, but the foresight of exchanging money at a discount is highly enjoyable. Apart from the present Eurozone countries, we are investigating whether it is possible to go to Eastern and Northern European economies like Poland, the Czech Republic and Lithuania wishing to join the EU.

Quite often local economies can differ from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Especially in the United States it feels as though completely different system are in operation in the suburban areas compared to the poor neighbourhoods in the centre of the city. The huge differences in wealth allows these sub-systems to co-exist. Putting the issue of value in a different perspective. How inflated is one compared to the other? How is the dependency of the one on the other? How about the nationally controlled commodities as cars, these transcend those border, but this seem to play only into the hands of the richer areas, the poorer getting stuck with debt.

E-strategies

Apart from eBay, we are looking at some strategies being used on the internet, and seeing whether we can work with some of the strange techniques which have developed in this extreme economic environment. One is to use the subnote, in stronger degree as a kind of hyper mark. We having been printing our toes on the money already, but we will now invite all Carnegie Mellon graduate students to do the same. Through the images on the subnote website, people will then be able to access the students web pages. A popular strategy is **co-optation**. Many people and small business wanting visitors, many systems have developed. Webrings are one example, a very interesting other one is a way to trick search engines. One of the criteria for a site’s index is its presence as a link on other pages. In this spirit groups and companies have been formed which put up lists of links to other people on their site and then have this page indexed by a search engine. Hundred people co-operating will give each person 99 links, and thus search engine credibility. Following this train of thought, subnote will offer serious collectors of money and money art, the possibility to acquire subnotes, thereby spreading our word and their long term collectors’ interests.

Proposal for a more transparent economy

All bills spend should be coloured according to the ways it has been received. Blue for manual labour and other hourly wages up to \$25 per hour. Brown for services rendered and wages higher than \$25 per hour. Red for capital gains. Pink for business profits. Purple for inheritances and gifts. Yellow for collected taxes. Black for illegal profit schemes.

A simple start, mark all the money you receive with a coloured dot next to the serial number.

Distribution strategies

Distribution is one of the four principles of marketing (place) as described in Philip Kotler's all time marketing classic, by business students referenced to as "The Bible"¹. It is the finale of this supposed meeting of demand and supply. The meeting of demand and supply is even more an unresolved issue in art than in business. How autonomous is artistic production? What influences consumption? Is art wanted? And what art is wanted, where and when? And why? A lot of the answers to these question can be found within the methods of distribution.

Why should the producer place 'the firm's destiny in the hands of intermediaries' as Kotler asked. Distribution in business is often seen as a power issue. But even more basically, it is a matter of survival. No distribution network means no business. The past decades have seen an immense growth in producer-led distribution chains. McDonalds being one of the prime examples of a strategy to keep all power in the hands of the producer. But even car companies are seen shifting from dealer networks to direct investments in retail outlets like Kwik-Fit.

For whom does the artist make work? This mythical question could be used in defining the proper relation between work and distribution. The old answer used to be that the artist cannot but make work, he needs to. There could be a more pragmatic answer, the artist wants to make work as an artist as it is a life-scenario felt most comfortable with. Aspects of perceived and wanted identity do play a part in this role assumption. Art then being the framework, is work being made for a peer group of other artists, for an art audience of professionals or for a broad art public. And within each group there are sub-contexts ranging from mainstream to radical. Though most artist aim for the professional art audience, being the most influential and controlling distribution outlets and art communication channels, a lot of artists have always opted out of this and chosen to work differently. Thus creating a more independent existence.

Subnote tries to play with the possibility of multi-channel distribution. On one level it sends out images to a general public, aiming for a presence in the domain of the general public, disseminating different views about money and economics. Secondly, it's presence on the web allows for access by a more defined art public or random visitors. More and more complex information can be made available there. Thirdly, through performances specific art publics are reached. These vary from peer groups to art interested people and members/donators. By involving people with the work through the exchange people are drawn into the project by becoming possessors and spenders of the subnotes. Lastly by asking other artists to design images for the money, a further, peer oriented, co-operation is opened.

On all levels the project is open for participation without losing its critical essence, be it a critique of general or art economics, of the holiness of the art image or object. As an example of poetic terrorism², it tries to stay autonomous and critical, while offering ironic alternatives.

Ambiguously avoiding the question for whom or what, subnote, only answers not for the white gallery wall, all other options are open.

¹ The other three being product, price and promotion, together known as the marketing mix. Kotler, Philip, *Marketing Management: analysis, planning and control*, Englewood Cliffs (NJ): PrenticeHall. Being one of the foremost marketing guru's the past twenty years, influencing thousands of eager business students., Kotler has recently published a book with Neil G. Kotler on *Museum Strategy and Marketing: Designing Missions, Building Audiences, Generating Revenue and Resources*, Englewood Cliffs (NJ): PrenticeHall, inseminating the art world with his analytic approach to marketing products and services.

² Bey, Hakim, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone: ontological anarchism, poetic terrorism*; Brooklyn (NY): Autonomedia, 1991.

Ironic utopism

The last decade has seen a rise in art which places itself outside the formal structure of the art world, or tries to set up alternatives for the continued hegemony of the object within the art world. Strategies often involve alignment with social or political ideas. The exhibition 'Plan B' in the Amsterdam Appel Gallery³ brought some work together. Using the possibilities offered by artistic practice, they operate in the grey zone between art and the magical 'real world'. Most of these artists tends to be less radical or rigorous than Dada or Fluxus, and there does not seem to be as much of a formal communal spirit, or commonly developed theoretical framework⁴. However one can trace it's heritage down to Futurism and Dada and the rest of the historic avant garde in the first half twentieth century, and to fluxus, conceptual art movement and the socially oriented art of the later seventies and eighties. In the nineties these intentions have become institutionalized.⁵ Is this institutionalization it's appeal?

Analyzing the method of working and content of this, very broad group of artists, it seems clear that though critical of the art world, there is a consensus that the world outside is worse. Protected by their artistic credentials both worlds are aimed at. Ranging from activist, anarchic to humanist or even romantic, it is not always clear whether intentions are idealistic, ironic or cynical. Artistic intentions and critical writing often seem to be based on very positive axioms, and generally expect an impact of the work in the outside world. This seems to be strange given the way the legacy of Dada and Fluxus has been embraced by the art institutions, and the socio-cultural and economic environment we find ourselves in.

Taking into consideration the predominant level of (art-)historic knowledge and philosophy amongst artists, one would assume that socially and politically focused art would come down to either ironic utopism or utopian sarcasm.

Desirability

Some psychologists have concluded that most people are slightly schizophrenic. In traffic, people often find themselves being angry about not having been given the right of way, while reciprocally they would always excuse themselves for taken the right of way when they do so. This phenomenon is becoming more visible in the economic arena as well, as people are asking companies to be ethical, while demanding the cheapest products and highly profitable stocks.

The artist creates and recreates his identity and personal myth. He has chosen a professional occupation based on the expression of personal ideas. The gaze of the other is her fellow traveller. How idealistic can her intentions then be? Can I give and remain innocent.

As a system, the industry of artistic production is likely to be more schizophrenic than other industries. As valuation of artistic products and practices is extremely uncertain⁶ and can only be construed through subjective verbal constructs, it is methods of self evaluation cannot but even be derivatory from these constructs. This second degree uncertainty leads to a continuous need for self investigation and appraisal. What is art and what is its worth, questions which are asked on generic and specific level. To be able to give an answer at all though, quite a stringent framework needs to be developed, this is clear for instance in art's conscious adoption of the modernist need for continuous redefinition. Beyond the norms of normality one cannot hide consciously, continuously. The need for continuously re-invented artistic purity in a pas de deux with the impossibility of objective evaluation through subjective constructs.

Where Guattari saw in schizophrenia the possible positive effects of a deterritorialization allowing for new connections, the mild schizophrenia stipulated in this paragraph is more likely to point to the hyper artificial

³ <http://www.museumserver.nl/deappel/nederlands/exhibition/planb/>

⁴ Still some attempts to issue joint manifesto's do exist, as there is for instance the Blue Dogma Manifesto, initiated by European artists Olivier Calix, Anna Guarro, Una Henry, Alicia Framis and Lilet Breddels, http://www.lostart.nl/loneliness/participate_fs_3.html

⁵ Felshin, Nina, ed. *But is it Art? The spirit of Art as Activism*. Seattle: Bay Press Inc. 1995, p9.

⁶ Mueser, Peter, and Dow, Jay, *Experimental Evidence on the Divergence Between Measures of Willingness to Pay and Willingness to Accept: The Role of Value Uncertainty*, MU Working Paper 97-18, Columbia (MO): University of Missouri Columbia, 1998, <http://netec.mcc.ac.uk/WoPEc/data/Papers/wpawuwpx9803001.html>

deterritorialization of ultra-capitalism.⁷ This would bring an analysis of the art industry in the realm of Baudrillard's hyperreality and implosion of the social.⁸

Is the artist working with a social-political agenda aware of the irony of his endeavours? No? Did he start believing in himself again after his honour post-modern exploitation? Has he fallen in the media driven belief of the artist as self-fulfiller. The artist at top of the ladder of Maslow. Taking up his responsibilities in this corrupt society. Or rather really idealistic? Discarding the horror of a Baudrillardian universe and becoming the Guattarian desiring machine, a positive productive superman in today's imploded reality? And this while acknowledging himself and the part and playing the part in which he enlisted himself. Naivety? Hope?

An art of gestures

The intent of the artist remains as unclear as Adam Smith's invisible hand. Some would agree with art as a process of "[...] a series of transformations from meaningless to meaningful heterogeneity."⁹ This definition of the economic process by Alderson is followed by his analysis that customer value is derived not from an object itself but rather from the experience-providing service that the object performs. This view, expressed in the fifties, has only met with widespread approval in the nineties by fellow marketers and economists.¹⁰

The similarities between these views of economics and of the art history are startling. The object has died, but its funeral is taking ages. The artist has died, but has resurrected. Dealing with an art world which incorporates its critics as quickly as high capitalism absorbs its alternatives, the artist is left with little strategies. Co-opt or be co-opted.

How to make art being aware of all the systemic and personal contradictions. Only an art of gestures, an art which playfully hints at possibilities can try to take up issues which reach into the art world and beyond. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard for their self-interest," wrote Adam Smith in "The Wealth of Nations" in 1776.

Playful as not to get caught in the real worlds outside of the studio. Playing off the possibilities offered by the quasi-naivety of the role assumed. Playing with the symbols of reality against the symbolism of art. Playing with the concept of innocence we can accept guilt.

Can I give and remain innocent.

It's the stupid economy

In the new economic dream world giving surpassed asking as a commercial strategy. Giving as a metaphor for asking led to an unmitigated display of wanting. Can I give and remain innocent.

As economics have become the sole yardstick for policy considerations, the economic needs even more attention. The basic elements of economy theory are being lost. The economy has surpassed the galactic order in terms of mystic quality.

What makes up the value of an object, of a person? What is value added in a service economy, and in relation to individual efforts? How much money can be made through monetary transactions? How important is the social fabric of self realisation as an economic force? Why does the myth of rational economic man survive as companies feed themselves on all the irrational bodies populating their shops?

⁷ Guattari, Félix, *Soft Subversions*, Brooklyn (NY): Semiotext(e), 1996.

⁸ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulations*, Brooklyn (NY): Semiotext(e),

⁹ "The whole economic process may be described as a series of transformations from meaningless to meaningful heterogeneity." Alderson, Wroe, "The Analytical Framework for Marketing", *Proceedings – Conference of Marketing Teachers from Western States*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958.

¹⁰ "Clairvoyantly, Alderson recognized that customer value is derived not from an object itself but rather from the experience-providing service(s) that the object performs." Holbrook, Morris, Columbia University on <http://www.acr-news.org/HLPb.html>.