

MULTIPLICITY, GENEROSITY, AND THE VERNACULAR

Lisa Bulawsky



PROJECT OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION

Blindspot Galleries is a public, mobile exhibition project established in 2002 in St. Louis, Missouri. Blindspot extends and mobilizes exhibition space, and acts as a site for distribution and exchange. Drawing on the social and political history of prints and the distributive qualities of the multiple, Blindspot makes art accessible to the public, as a visual and interactive gift. The vehicle for distribution is a car, an everyday means of transportation driven for everyday things, passing through urban and suburban locations, wherever its driver needs to go. Artwork is created on and attached to the automobile with magnetic vinyl. Though not explicitly advertised, the work is designed to be taken by viewers and attached to other magnetic surfaces, thereby enhancing the extension of viewing spaces as well as viewing opportunities, and creating the plural nature of Blindspot Galleries.



Blindspot Galleries, with the inaugural exhibition, *In the Denmark of the Soul*, parked in front of the St. Louis Art Museum, 2002



All in Good Company, All in Good Time, Blindspot Galleries, 2009

BACKGROUND AND PHILOSOPHY

Blindspot Galleries' founder, Lisa Bulawsky, a printmaker, was engendered to put her personal vehicle into service as a device for dissemination, capitalizing on the legacy and historical significance of the print as a democratic form. Printmaking is known as the "democratic medium" owing to its nature of multiplicity and to its relative ease of accessibility. The use of printing can be seen as a kind of manifesto, a symbol of democracy, and a metaphor for freedom, however idiosyncratic that freedom may be. Blindspot Galleries explores that kind of freedom, and the ideology of art as a cultural mediator. Drawing on the rich history and potential of the print multiple that allows the masses access to art and information, the assertion is that art can and does affect social change.

Blindspot resists the institutionalization of art. It asserts a reaction against refinement into preciousness, and to the loss of gritty exchange and strident didacticism that has accompanied the history of print, from Raimondi, copying Titian's paintings as engravings on copper and reaping the rewards, to Hogarth, selling his suites door-to-door. Blindspot builds on these print traditions that capitalize on broad distribution to create a larger public audience. The print has been a translocal agent throughout its history, a thread of the vernacular, from inexpensive chapbooks peddled on the streets in the 17th century, to ukiyo-e prints in Japan and Currier and Ives prints in America in the 19th century, to posters and prints done by WPA artists in the 20th century. Circulation outside of cultural institutions has granted the print multiple an anti-elitist platform.



17th century chapbook peddler



Currier and Ives lithograph, 1872



WPA 1935, Ben Shahn

CONTEXT

The strategies of Blindspot Galleries are supported by two key ideas represented by the work of author and thinker, Lewis Hyde. The use of distribution as a weapon, as a strategy for capitalizing on the freedom afforded by the print multiple can be said to come from two characters or impulses: the trickster and the gift. In Trickster Makes This World, Hyde argues for the role of the artist as trickster, as challenger to cultural conventions, in efforts to produce change and access, by the breaking down of barriers. The trickster is a traveler and a boundary-crosser, crossing both physical and social boundaries, blurring lines of cultural demarcation. In The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, Hyde defends the value of creativity in the face of a world that is increasingly commodified. "I have hoped . . . to speak of the inner gift that we accept as the object of our labor, and the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture."¹ He argues that art is, and functions best, as gift, and must be in continuous circulation in order to retain its gift qualities. Blindspot Galleries wears these qualities, literally. It intervenes like the trickster to offer itself up like a gift.

FRAMEWORK

The work of Blindspot Galleries is bracketed by a genre of activity rooted in the political, reliant on participation, and evidenced by the print/multiple object. This activity is situated within the larger climate of collaborative, interactive, and interventionist work that is prevalent in art practice today. These strategies are in alignment with "a critique of culture that is inclusive of non-art spaces, non-art institutions, and non-art issues (blurring the division between art and non-art, in fact)." ² In this work, political motivation is manifested by concrete, participatory objects.

¹ Lewis Hyde, The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, Vintage Books, 1983, Introduction

² Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997), 85-110.

PRECEDENTS

FELIX GONZALEZ TORRES



Felix Gonzalez Torres, stack

Felix Gonzalez-Torres is a key figure, perhaps even a father figure for the genre, for this kind of artistic activity. Open-ended, participatory artworks such as his “stacks” operate as private declarations in the public sphere, activated by the engagement of the viewer, simultaneously completed and extended by their participation. The activities of giving (by the artist) and taking (by the viewer) create a sense of shared responsibility for the ideas as well as their distribution. As the artist stated, "without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in."³ To borrow the words of Richard Stallman, founder of the open source software movement, the work is free like speech, not free like beer. In other words, it is not consumed, it is shared. The gift is free, but it demands and creates community.

RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER



Rivane Neuenschwander, *I Wish Your Wish*

³ Felix Gonzalez Torres, source: <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artists/2667#ixzz2B5fsd9IF>
[San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#)

The hundreds of colorful ribbons that make up Rivane Neuenschwander's *I Wish Your Wish* are printed with wishes submitted by past visitors to museums where the work is exhibited. Viewers are encouraged to take one of the ribbons and tie it to their wrist, and replace the empty spot with a written wish of their own. In this piece and others, she addresses the role of the audience by referring to different *levels* of participation. She asks viewers to be participants by "taking care of the work" to one extent or another.

ADRIAN KONDRATOWICZ



Adrian Kondratowicz, *TRASH: anycoloryoulike*

TRASH: anycoloryoulike is an art intervention for urban beautification and environmental awareness. Adrian Kondratowicz gives away colorful bags that transform standard piles of trash into vivid sculptures of color through the participation of local business owners and residents. Each TRASH bag is 100% biodegradable and naturally scented to repel insects and vermin. Kondratowicz considers each bag a work of art and hopes that the visibility of the bags will draw attention to the excess trash that we produce.

VERTIGO PRESS WITH ALL ALONG PRESS



Vertigo Press/All Along Press, *We Belong to this Band*, pad of tear-off portraits planted on greenway in Minneapolis

We Belong To This Band was a participatory public print project by Vertigo Press in collaboration with All Along Press. The project is a collection of homages or portraits of artists and printmakers who have gone before us. It is meant to be an ephemeral monument that celebrates

the lives of artistic heroes and fellow mortals, propagating their memory through the printed image. Participants contributed images of their heroes that were then printed and bound into tear-off pads, attached to garden stakes, and planted throughout the city of Minneapolis, to be taken by passers-by.

CONCLUSION: RELEVANCE

“Michel de Certeau’s distinction between the strategic and the tactical defines the difference between urban planning and the urban vernacular. It is not by accident that design projects designate themselves “master” plan or “strategic” plan. Think of the vernacular as the opposite: not a master plan, but a local improvisation, not a strategic plan, but a tactical one.”⁴

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Blindspot Galleries opposes institutional and “master” procedures, instead operating in the vernacular, improvisational terrain of the street, the road, the parking lot, the city, the country. Its premise and promise comes from the portable, participatory, interactive, and subversive tactics of interventionist art. It is at once street art, relational, art, exhibition space, anti-elitist political art, and gift gesture. Throughout its run as a mobile exhibition space, Blindspot has hosted projects that have been targeted and staged by emerging artists, exhibitions of collective enterprise, and site-specific works.

Blindspot offers not only an extension of traditional viewing arenas for art, but also an alternative to the passive viewing experience. The plural title of the project, Blindspot Galleries, refers to its implicit continuation. Once a magnet is removed from the car and placed in another context, it becomes part of the gallery as well. The multiple begets multiplicity. Participation begets community. The print/multiple object levels the playing field of art viewership and becomes an organism that mirrors our agency and our collective humanity.

⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Performing the City: Reflections on the Urban Vernacular”, Everyday Urbanism, Chase, Crawford, Kaliski

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