

the invisible ARTIST

Under Cover with "See Me Tell Me"

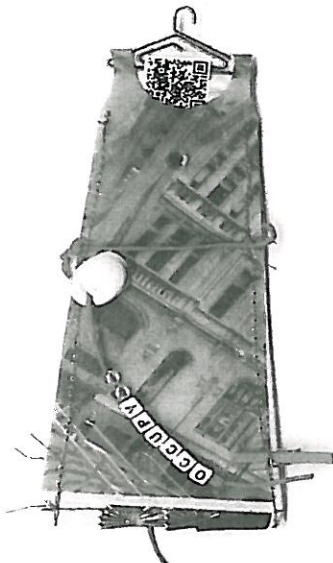
BY RICHARD LESLIE

Ephemeral encounters with small curious objects gifted to the world. The spark of a moment that unfolds all too briefly, then the smile and maybe a single syllable utterance: the ineffable and inexpressible brought to you by the will-to-form and re-form in the midst of the urban hustle. Free! Or maybe not. Is there a free gift?

The French sociologist-anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950)—he who influenced the Surrealists via George Bataille, and the Paris Situationists—seems to be the first to study gifts and in turn gifted us with his book "The Gift" (1923). Ironically he concluded there was no such thing as a gift if you meant (with apologies to "Dire Straits" and "Rush") "something for nothing and the gift for free". Mauss concluded that the societies that used a 'gift economy' built up gift-debts and the interactions developed over time while waiting for you to return the gift was the way social connections were established. Restated, a gift carries a required reciprocity, the reciprocal demands of return. But this is not so bad when you compare it to a capitalist system that alienates the object from its maker and even from its owner when money is used, i.e. a commodity culture where the exchange value replaces the older ritual value. Gift economies then are one way to overcome alienation with a different (albeit required) social network while at the same time preserving a special, even magical, understanding of an object.

"See Me Tell Me" (SMTM) remains anonymous, like a capitalist removed from the fray or the pre-capitalist guild worker, but with the antithetical move of offering works free with the reciprocity required by Mauss's schema now optional. Whether you locate one of the small gifts by accident as you drift through the urban labyrinth or wait for the location to be posted on the SMTM blog site, the social connection is merely a request, like a note in a bottle adrift, and the reciprocal move is merely an utterance. No gifting police will knock or even locate or, in some way, care. It's you who has to choose to care or not care, either way without burden, merely delight.

In one sense this is a magical crux. Magic is what is not understood. It is the irrational, as understood in comparison to some system of normalcy that has not yet sufficiently expanded to incorporate the interruptions. The door to the irrational has always been one of the major tools of the avant-garde.



See Me Tell Me Shifts: 36 Views of the ruins of Zuccotti

Now the "anonymous" identity of the giver-artist is bound up with the object loaned/given rather than depersonalized because you owe them nothing and you paid nothing. This flies in the face of the logic of a system that has taught us that we must ask a price in order to force other people to care; something given for free is framed as valueless. Here I have to stop and ask, a bit like the Dadaists on the nature of a rationality that leads to insane conduct, where then is the perversion located? And formed by which standard of existence? Are we even capable of such reformings? I don't think there's an answer yet. Social relations established along the lines of social art and systems have not been in play and of duration or sufficient strength to

know the consequences or options. We are, thankfully and literally, feeling our way(s). One certainty; these are not options provided by the commercial art market no matter how skilled the manipulators. (Yo, Damien, are you listening?) But neither does it exclude other street artists that have developed their own private community networks which now function in public relation to us, and/or refused incorporation into commodity-exchange value. Despite the differences SMTM's project is closest in spirit to the Graf culture.

SMTM's property is BOTH private and public/social. You now "own" it but you did not pay for it and have a choice, are encouraged, to regift in two different ways. In a recent exhibition in New Jersey SMTM mounted magnetic, blinking boxes and miniature shift dresses on the wall and asked everyone to take two (with an optional donation to the not-for-profit), one to keep and one to give away, to regift. At other times there have been similar encouragements written on the works themselves. Give this to someone else; do not own it, as it is merely a moment that is precious. Secondly, you are requested, not required, to regift the anonymous creator by commenting on the SMTM blog. It is your choice to dispel the so-called gift-debt, which places our social relations outside of the requirement inscribed by Mauss, And even if the "gift" is not acknowledged it exists through the knowing via the comments of those who have voluntarily commented and by your own sly smile at having found "sumptin fer nuthin," your own(-ed) little precious; simultaneously unique and private while owned by many others in a public discourse.

It is said the classic difference between a one-way broadcast communication system (e.g., tweeting) and a social system or network is the concept of having a truly acknowledged friend; a two-way street. If you tweet (broadcast) and have followers you do not have friends, are not social...or so the theory goes. By classic understanding the brief exclamations of "found it" or "whoa" posted on the SMTM

blog is NOT a social network. Or is it? Therein lay one of the problems of this new form of urban (note I do NOT say "public") art: indirect communication is accepted as a true interactive social act in a time when data/information is the coin. Critical theorists bemoan this as another form of alienation. You've heard it all before, the embodied humanist argument. Sitting in front of a screen communicating is not a social interaction. However, those raised within the screen cult system accept it as "natural"—one of the four-letter words Marxist theorists have warned of for years—and for whom it is social networking.

For them what is natural is the acceptance of the fragment rather than an attempt to reach beyond it, preferring to stay within it and to gift the condition of SMTM's part-objects with being human. As with the archive, once understood to be a totalizing affair, we now understand that what is natural within capitalism is fragmentary and rather than resist in traditional avant-gardist ways, we nestle down into its soft and warm contradictory folds. In that sense social urban art has always failed by accepting exactly what cultural critics have warned is the damaging part of the modernist and more schizophrenic post-modernist conditions—cultural fragmentation. But the supposed failure in such tactic may well be the magnificent trope, much like the rhizomics of OWS.

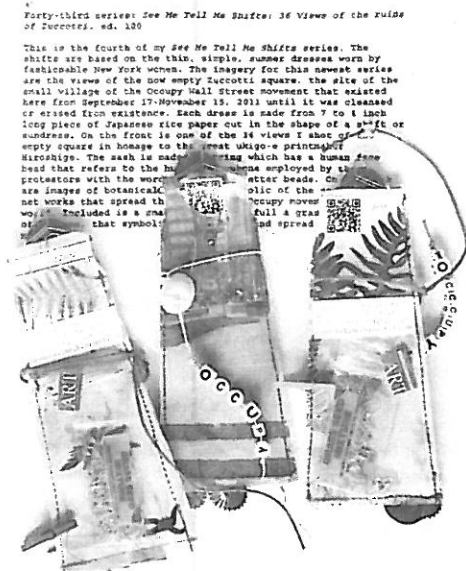
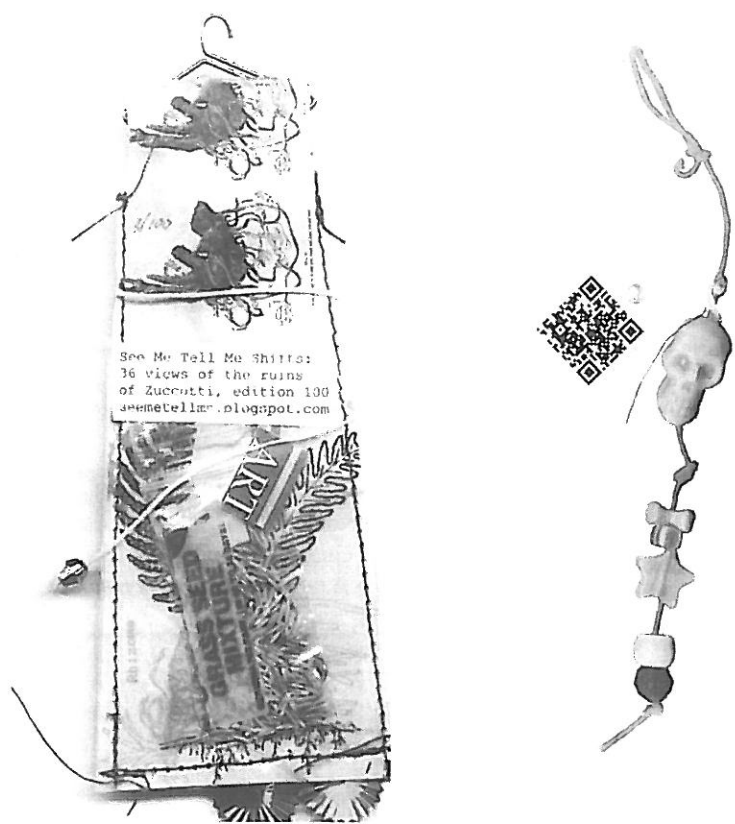
Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that the much celebrated French Situationist International came to the conclusion that no art work could escape the cultural absorption of capitalism, thus the only solution, after throwing the art object makers out of their Republic, was not to make objects but to locate situations and turn them. It's not that resistance was futile but rather it was temporary and temporal. Welcome to the turning tactic central to gifting!

And yet perhaps the most attractive aspect of SMTM's work is the return—the gifting—of the most traditional aspects of art, now made radical due to the historical context of what has <withered> away from art: delight, magic, creative diversity and originality, community—ritual value overturning exchange value. Why is this then at the margins? What then is use-value and where is it located? Perhaps in the subject matter of SMTM:

monsters and saints, summer shift dresses, miniature folding books that open, your picture, Van Gogh's chair, free Ai Wei Wei, numbers, letters, artists' birthdays, Joseph Cornell, phases of the moon, Fluxus, yesterday's news, February snowstorms, Walker Evans, windmills, parasols, the five senses, Paris, blue skies, beaches not visited, monarch butterflies not seen, London, Yayoi Kusama, tiny blinking flashes of LED colors in the darkness of the night, small sparkling pieces of miniature and passing worlds...

Richard Leslie
copyright, the author

www.seemetellme.blogspot.com



Forty-second series: Subway Tokens.
Carry this token in your pocket or seat on the subway, your train will access from you will look up from the outside and visionary artists as well as the windings attract and concentrate fellow subway riders. In this tokens as "saints of the subway" in beads, buttons, sequins, and other written on the verse and they are printed on the QR code on the back. (revoltmagazine.org). 25 of the work will be placed out in the world.

About the Artist - See Me Tell Me

See Me Tell Me Shifts: Forty-second series: Subway Tokens