

Philosophical analyses of “Gift giving” and the potential meaning it carries for a contemporary artist in today’s digital age

Research Paper

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how “Gift giving” of a contemporary artist could be relevant in today’s market economy and digital world. First it looks at the meanings associated behind the word “Gift” and looks at the various forms of gift giving. After that it aims to provide a glimpse of insight into current gift giving practices in our culture and their implications. Looking at the possible benefits and contradictions it may cause. Moving forward contemporary artist practices are highlighted as case studies of a possibility where in their art practice evidence of a possibility of gift giving can be noticed. In the conclusion part of this Research Paper the relevance and possible usefulness of a gift giving process is reached.

In recent years, many of the most interesting developments in the scientific study of society have taken place at the boundaries between economics and the other social sciences. New approaches to economic life have reshaped the ways in which we think about familiar economic processes, such as labour markets. At the same time, there has been an uprising of interest in forms of economic life that were previously ignored. One of them is gift giving.

It is surprising that one knows so very little about the reasons why we give things to others, for we do know that a great many people derive a great deal of pleasure from the act of giving. This Research Paper takes qualitative research from sociologist studies, artist processes and article analyses in order gain a greater understanding about what a “Gift and “Gift giving” can be and mean in today’s digital and industrial societies.

Keywords for this Research Paper include: Community, Relationship, Circulating Acceptance, Enhancing, Kindness, Honesty, Fragility , Hope

Introduction

“The daily commerce of our lives sugar for sugar and salt for salt - as the blues singers say – proceeds at its own constant level, but a gift revives the soul.” (Lewis Hyde)

This Research Paper was written on the topic of “Gift Giving” because the writer of the paper came interested in how one could give something to the public and would that be of any relevance in these turbulent times. Is it useful to get a gift? Can an artist “enhance” a simple object and give it away in order to enhance people’s everyday life? Could it be true that the spirit of an artist’s “Gift” can wake one’s own? Do artists make “Gifts” for the public in today’s commercialized world and is it a relevant thing to pursue? Is it an “obligation” for an artist to aim to give something away that may be of relevance to others? Is it a moral responsibility for humans to try to make a small gesture that may evoke hope or peaceful thoughts?

The majority of people nowadays do not have time to enter galleries and museums. Less and less people visit museums and galleries in today’s digital age, although when people travel this number is slightly higher. During their everyday commute, their walking passage in large cities is mostly in a hectic and fast paced modern world. In a lot of cases the scenery is visually polluted. Could a small object provided as a “Gift” in an urban environment give a bit of a lift, smile or relief and hope and the disappearance of passer-by’s problems for a second?

In this Research Paper the writer will use qualitative research deriving from sources including books, case studies, video and newspaper articles, artists’ work photography and audio podcasts. This Research Paper starts with defining what a “Gift” and “Gift Giving” mean. Moving on to the elaboration of the subject of cultural relevance and evolution of “Gift giving”. The Paper highlights contemporary examples of artists whose work could potentially be

interpreted as a “Gift giving”. From these findings a conclusion is formulated at the end of the Research Paper on the questions raised in this chapter.

I. What is a “Gift” and various forms of “Gift giving”

The definition of a gift according to the “Editors of Encyclopaedia Oxford Dictionary” is described as a thing given willingly to someone without payment. Synonyms of the word gift amongst many others are present, donation, charity, contribution.

The word can also mean a natural ability or talent someone possesses.

There are a number of forms of “Gift giving” from which a few are selected in this Research Paper in order to highlight the different fields they can be present at and meanings which could be associated with them.

Mauss maintained that the study of the gift involved a "return to the old and elemental". Mauss applied Durkheim's method to an analysis of the gift, where he concluded that the essential features of gift transactions are the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to make a return for gifts received. Mauss's discussion of the previous has been particularly influential, and others have subsequently claimed that the norm of reciprocity is a cultural universal (quoted in Cheal p.2). Similarly, to the above Lewis Hyde in his book “The Gift” (2019) defines the “Gift” as something that circulates.

Looking at the different forms of “Gift giving” one of the most noble forms is the altruistic gift giving process. Case examples are often found when people volunteer for blood or organ donations. Studies of people who have been asked to give one of their kidneys to an ill relative. The human body is able to function with one kidney and now one has the technology to transplant another person’s kidney into the body of one whose own kidneys have failed. The

biggest risk with such a procedure is that the receiver's immunological system reacts as if the body had been attacked by a disease and therefore destroys the new kidney. The closer the match between the blood type and the tissue of the donor the less likely that the kidney will be rejected. Therefore, in most cases the kidney transplants happen between close relatives. Hyde raises the question of how a person decides to give someone their kidney? The decision is not a trivial one as there are certain risks as about one in fifteen donor dies as a result of his or her "Gift". It involves a major operation, with pain and hospital stay leaving a large scar and still what was found in this study is that the majority of kidney donors volunteer to give as soon as they hear of the need. The choice is made right in the present without any period of hesitation furthermore the donors do not think of it as a decision at all. This study was made at the University of Minnesota, and Hyde continues to state that instantaneous decision is a mark of emotional and moral life. One can notice that in almost all of these case studies emotional connection tends to preclude quantitative evaluation (Hyde p.83).

There exist a great many further examples of both private and corporate gift giving. Gift giving from a comedians' point of view could be the laughter of the viewers of the performance. Another example of a scientist's work would be their ideas that can be interpreted as the gift to the readers.

Gift giving could be noticed in small children's actions as they give drawings or other small objects they have made to their parents and loved ones. It can be noticed that the heart shape is often used in their drawings. The heart is one of the most commercial shapes which is most widely used in our times. Digital messaging and the overuse of the heart shape can be noticed in the advertisements as well as in text messages people nowadays send to each other. However, there can be a reason behind it's mainstream use in media and physical objects.

Gifts are also given as a peace symbol and have the potential to represent a peace. An example for this is when The United States of America helped and took part in order to rebuild

Japan after the second world war. It is interesting that the same action was not implemented after the Vietnamese war, these decisions are politically decided by the actual government in power.

Gift giving can also be found in today's market economy at the organisational level. Companies are giving gifts to their clients mainly during the holiday season. Corporate holiday gifts act as Thank you gifts. Large Corporations, financial management companies, health care providers and media outlets are a few industries that reward clients and employees with gift. A form of telling the customer and employees they are appreciated. Some companies stress political correctness and limiting corporate gift giving and urge transparency (John Carroll, 2005, p.33).

Gifts can also be used for gaining status and power. Controversies of gift giving include bribery, which can happen at a political or organisational or personal relationship level. For this reason, it is the case that lawyers and judges in most countries cannot accept gifts.

Often in large companies (many cases can be found in the news and financial industries) workers cannot receive gifts and this is signed in their work contract.

Another possible disadvantage can be noticed in the media & arts field where one can give a gift or share their works with the public to gain recognition or fame.

Gifts can also be used to convince or alter opinion or lobby for a change of policy. Craftivist Collective is an example of a movement where it can be noticed there is a way to fight for change and create change. People part of the collective can stand up in order to create a world one wants to see. It is a form of gentle protest, with a craft chosen and an activism taken place, moreover, doing it well offers solutions, incites thought and could initiate change. During the crafts project artists can make custom-made gifts for people in influence and decision-makers to encourage them to be part of a solution in an important subject matter. These undertakings

also provoke attention and action in the public sphere, from people walking by the street craftism and buyers finding hidden messages (Corbett S. 2022).

Arlie Hochschild has suggested that for a gift to be a gift it must be experienced as something extra - something beyond what we normally expect to receive.

Secondly, gifts may be redundant in the sense that they bring no advantage to their recipients, and thus add nothing to their well-being. Although this is rarely intentional it is not uncommon. If gifts are redundant why do people attach great importance to them?

The answer proposed by Cheal in his book is that gifts are used to construct certain kinds of voluntary social relationships. By a moral economy he means a system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable, because through them social ties are recognized, and balanced social relationships are maintained (Cheal 2015).

II. Cultural relevance and evolution of “Gift giving”

Gift giving transactions in tribal societies have been intensively researched and considerable knowledge has been gathered from them. Social scientists concluded that existing social theories in today’s market economy have been not investigated fully and that new ideas are needed. Lewis Hyde investigates in his book “The Gift” the value of creative labour. Researching thoroughly many examples of literature and folklore, tribal customs and literature, economics and law Hyde examines how our society -governed by marketplace cannot fully capture the worth of an artist’s work. He highlights the other way possible which allows artwork and ideas to circulate freely in contrast of hoarding them as commodities. Hyde describes one tribal custom where the Kula gifts: armshells and necklaces, move continually around a wide ring of islands in the Massim archipelago. Each travel in a circle, the red shell necklaces move clockwise and the armshells move counter clockwise. The gifts travel from island to island and when a person receives a gift another gift is sent forward therefore

producing a circle. He therefore finds that in most ancient cultures a Gift is something that circulates (Hyde 2019, p.16).

Claude Levi-Strauss stated that universal structures of reciprocity are the foundations for all social life. Levi-Strauss was fascinated by the potlatching of certain groups of North American Indians, and he suggested that direct parallels could be drawn between that and gift practices in modern societies. Cheal mentions that social scientist researchers found that Christmas gift giving in contemporary North America was viewed conducted in the pursuit of prestige (Cheal 2015). Gift practices are, (as Mauss suggested) rooted in custom and tradition. These Gift customs are not fixed, for they have been affected by changes in the larger society, as Theodore Caplow has concluded (Caplow 1982, cited in Cheal, 2015). Caplow claims that in the USA there has been a hike in the ritualization of family life, as a means of maintaining relationships that are both important and insecure. In his opinion it is the vulnerability of family life in modern society that is responsible for the great importance attached to gift giving.

The tension between the market relationships and personal relationships is a unique characteristic of social life in capitalist societies. This tension is not found in the simplest societies, where an institutionalized market economy does not exist. Knowledge of the elementary structures of primitive societies is therefore likely to be of dubious value in understanding the gift practices of modern societies. Cheal (2015) argues that gift giving provides a major contribution to contemporary social life.

Hyde mentions the interconnectedness of the giver the gift and the receiver in the following quote: „I do not mean to imply by these explanations that the increase of coppers is simply metaphorical, or that the group projects its life onto them. For that would imply that the liveliness of the group can be separated from the gift, and it cannot. If the copper disappears,

so does the life. When a song moves us, we do not say we've projected our feelings onto the melody, nor do we say our lover is a metaphor for the other sex. Likewise, the gift and the group are two separate things, neither stands for the other. We could say however, that a copper is an image for the life of the group, for a true image has a life of its own. Every mystery needs its image. It needs these two, the ear and the song, the he and the she, the soul and the word. The tribe and its gift are separate, but they are also the same- there is a gap between them so they may breathe into each other, and yet there is no gap at all, for they share one breath, one meal for the two of them" (quoted in Hyde, p.46).

An example of an adverse cultural phenomenon persisting also today is mentioned in Veblen's cynical realism. He mentions the controversy of gift giving where status competition is the main purpose of gift transactions. When looking at these cultural happenings then one should notice to find that most giving consists of costly expenditures (Cheal p.113).

One cultural tradition interesting to mention can be found in the Buddhist monks customs: „The begging bowl of the Buddha". Thomas Merton wrote about this act as representing the ultimate theological root of the belief, not just the right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings. The idea of compassion central to Mahayana Buddhism, is based upon the interdependence of all living beings, therefore if the monk begs from the layman, it is not as a selfish person getting something from somebody else. He is simply opening himself to interdependence (Hyde p.30).

Will MacAskill explains in an interview conducted by Sam Harris that giving back is a moral responsibility for all of us living in a digital age. By visibility of all happenings around the world he mentioned that "doing good" with today's internet is like walking past a lake when we see a drowning child. We as humans simply cannot pass by as it is our basic goodness

and human nature that we must act in greater ways than ever before (MacAskill & Harris, 2022).

III. Exploring “Gift giving” in the work of contemporary artists

“Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life” (Picasso)

For almost 9000 years Japanese lacquer masters have been using a ceramic mending process called Kintsugi. The gift in this process can be noticed as the process provides longer lifetime for the given object. This Japanese Art consists of repairing broken ceramics by mending the areas of breakage with dusted glaze or with powdered gold silver or platinum. The mending can be a very difficult process because the lacquer cannot be removed after it dries meaning that all pieces must be assembled into place all at the same time even when there are many small broken pieces. The meaning of the word Kintsugi is “golden joinery” and this method of Kintsugi is widely used by many contemporary artists today. After the mending process the “Gift” can be summarized as both the “Time” lengthened and both the “Enhancement” of the repaired object that the owner is given to by the action of the artist.



Kintsugi repair by David Pike

One contemporary artist chosen to be included in this Research Paper is “Ememem”. He/she is an anonymous French street artist located in Lyon, France, creating mosaics in cracked sidewalks and fronts, mostly at night so it can often be detected in the morning. Ememem’s art partisans call him “the pavement surgeon”. His pavement plasters illuminate and enhance the wounds of the city textures. It can be viewed as a daring street art and contemporary art while recalling the traditional Japanese Kintsugi and can similarly be summarised as the art of repairing while enhancing. To formalize the style and technique he uses, Ememem founded the term of “flacking” from the French work “flack” meaning pubble. It is widely used today to cog nominate this “art of repairing holes”.

As far as one can assume Ememem doesn’t receive any financial compensation for this action, therefore it potentially can be viewed as a gift giving to the city. In addition, because it can be viewed as not legally permitted or commissioned by the government Ememem has to make his/her works with an incognito artist name. A possible disadvantage one can argue in this case is that by putting his signature on these pavement mending processes he is building an artist name for him/herself by gaining visibility in these public places. He/she might also be changing a planned minimalistic city scape, planed by an architect beforehand. As a preference to these “repairing’s” it can be added that they occur where there has already been a pothole on the street for a various length of time and that this process provides an assumed visual “enhancement”. Furthermore, by making these wholes, he/she is also making the pavement flat which reduces possible accidents of pedestrians walking on a cracked street.



@Ememem sidewalk repair in Italy and France

Another artist chosen to be added to this Research Paper is Mihály Kolodko, who makes miniature sculptures. He installs these sculptures at popular public spaces, moreover when viewing his artworks hidden messages can be noticed in each one of them. When looking at these miniature sculptures in this way there can be a gentle protest noticed in his artworks installed in the city which resonates with the “Craftivist collective” project mentioned in the earlier chapter. The small statues cannot be moved they are strongly inserted into the rocky pavements where his artworks are usually installed. Mihály Kolodko was born in Uzhhorod, Ukraine in 1978, he has Hungarian family roots as his home town is not far from the Hungarian border. He has graduated from Lviv Academy of Arts from the department of monumental sculpture. He has also been interested in the establishment of large forms, however since moving to Hungary he has focused his art on miniature sculptures. Working this way gave him a lot of advantages, mobility, speed and value and the confidence that even in a small form it is possible to communicate an important idea. In his opinion today there is a new era where the production of statues should not solely be a centrally ordered form. Space should be opened

for the public's interest and artists' as well. The statues are often referred to as "Guerrilla Statues" because they have been installed to public spaces without permission, although first there has not been a regulation for such a process in the city. His artworks became so iconic that art magazines and now even some quarters of the city are advertised with his small statues. One can argue also in this case as a possibly detriment that he became well known by using this process. The miniature statues helped him to become recognised for his talents by installing them in vastly visited touristic areas of the city. Nonetheless his artworks can be viewed as "Gifts" because no financial rewards are associated in the installing process moreover his "Gift" can be noticed in the visual surprise and humour and aesthetics noticed by the public.



"Gomboc Artur" placed in Tihany , and "Főkukac" miniature statue placed in Budapest Hungary, Kolodko Art

Conclusion

This Research Papers writer agrees with the main ideas of Hyde and Cheal, that gifts could serve as bridges between people, and therefore could be a relevant action to pursue even in today's digital age. The nature of the occasion and the nature of the gift are not the most important, it is the person and how they receive the gift that is of significance. As for the question raised in the introduction the conclusion is reached that if the thinking of an artist is

meaningful and the gift giving is done in a creative and relevant manner, it can provide added value to the public by making them feel “special” at the time of encountering with the “Gift”. It is not the redistribution of resources to those in need but rather “Gifts” serve to connect individuals to one another, as far as people are willing to participate in the process.

Art practices can demonstrate that art works can contribute to social justice goals by not just what they seek to discuss but also how they build communities of resistance and consciousness. Usefulness of a gift therefore could be argued to be true in cases when the spirit of the gift enhances someone’s daily life and gives one a sense of peace hope and a moment of feeling of openness in the moment of encountering with the gift. The aim here is to let others know that they are thought of, to share in their feelings or whatever it may be. Public art and the so-called new genre social practices has become so mainstream not only in places like Europe and North America, but also increasingly around the world. People’s lives have become so hectic that they don’t realise they are missing something. Only when they see the gift (for example a Kolodko statute) they feel they were missing something. The concept of hope & humanity can be visions aimed through a contemporary artist’s gift giving process. It can be a creative action that possesses hidden message that there are alternatives one can choose in the face of adversities. Between the stimulus and response there is a space at which artworks can enhance and provide, the moment of stepping back and noticing something previously one was not aware of before. In summary the “Gifts of these Gifts” contain for the public an experience of a moment of a certain peace, a sense of life free of turmoil of the world. As the cultural examples show gifts when properly thought out can be a way of representing the basic goodness and interconnectedness that lies in humans and human societies.

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