

*Parts and Wholes, the Gift*

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Parts and Wholes, The Gift. Master of Fine Arts. 2012

Rita Camacho Lomelí. Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media & Design

OCAD University

## **Abstract**

*Parts and Wholes, the Gift* is a thesis project consisting of written scholarship and a series of interventionist, performative projects that investigate how the gift manifests in art practices and our everyday experiences. In *Parts and Wholes, the Gift* the work of art, as if a gift, is discussed through a variety of lenses. These include its paradoxical nature as labour and its challenge as an autonomous act, to the sociopolitical culture of capitalized economy, by living in the economy of the useful as a superfluous act, surpassing it and making it work. In *Parts and Wholes, the Gift* I focus on potential frameworks and methodologies to understand ways of being together. It is an inquiry into the recognition that the work of art belongs to no one and that the artist is the channel through whom a work of art is given back to all.

**Acknowledgments**

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## **Dedication**

*I offer these works to you.  
Without you they are nothing.  
I need you to finish the work,  
to become part of it, to get lost.*

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## **Preface**

### Why the gift?

This study has been motivated by enjoyment, visions, doubts, confusions, and the sense of self(dis)encounter. My focus for my Master's Thesis Project has been to understand the meaning of the gift in my own practice, discovering that it is a notion that has been discussed in many different disciplines and the field of comprehension is very ambiguous and extremely broad. It made me re-think my previous engagements since one of my tactics has been to give things away on the street and in the gallery. These gifts could be potatoes, christmas balls, small flags, little bottles filled with water, cocktails or sculptures made of scrub sponges. These procedures were attempts to be recognized as *artist* by the connoisseur and the passerby.

## Introduction

The projects that are part of this investigation are immersions and absorptions in unique temporal experiences, which are bound together through theories of ‘the gift’. They are situated in diverse contexts that allow the examination of how gestures of giving and receiving are mutable, ebb and flow events that exist in very different circumstances. This exhibition, as a whole, consists of three pieces that touch each other yet without fusing together. It contains these three gifts that are kept alive by constant donation. The text that accompanies my exhibition circulates a series of questions that travel through my own practice considering anthropological models, art movements and philosophical thoughts that use gifting as a method to establish social relations whether as a way of disruption, as a strategy of inquiry, and/or as a form of resistance.

These projects invest in minor enactments of risk and destruction. They rely on the critical possibility of the gift and its refusal to produce, characterized by circulation and consumption. I explicitly thematize the ambiguities of the gift within the structures of the art system<sup>1</sup>, as if a festival and through the work of art, as if a gift.

Part of this research concentrated on the uses of space, on ways of re-appropriating systems and on techniques of re-employment through which we can recognize procedures of everyday practice. Which is to say that these iterations mimic

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1 ‘art system’ refers to mainstream platforms such as museums and galleries as well as self-organized practices, that most of the times are “invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture” (Sholette, 1)

and exaggerate processes of the post-industrial economy, through repetitive actions that mirror waste by means of squandering time and autonomous labour, emulating a progressive loss and showing them as unnecessary acts.

I wish to set in motion the possibilities of the gift, with a desire to bring these uneventful and overlooked aspects of lived experience to visibility. To demonstrate, according to de Certeau, how the loss in a gift economy, appears as an excess (waste), a challenge (rejection to profit), or a crime (attack to property). (27) In these projects I explore gestures of giving and receiving in three ways; bodily, in space and on site so as to examine points in time, openings, gaps, intervals and tracts where the gift could possibly exist, which could be in a song, on city streets or perhaps in the pages of a book.

All these preconceived connotations of the gift prompt this investigation, but the specific undertaking of this research-based practice is the work of art, as if a gift, which caused me to reflect on Georges Bataille's theoretical speculation regarding the gift in the sacrificial order of the potlatch<sup>2</sup>. He reckoned "We need to give away, lose or destroy. But the gift would be senseless if did not take the meaning of acquisition. Hence giving must become *acquiring a power*." (203) Thus the work of art, as if a gift, is a locus of paradoxical power, offering itself at the same time that it holds itself in suspense – it is a disbursement and deposition. It is a loss and a risk, that can open a possibility, or not. These considerations permit me to present some of the questions that circulate in this investigation that confront and contrast ideas about unconditional giving and offering in

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2        this ceremony will further explain in this section as well as his function as anthropological model

the production of art. To what extent is the artist as giver a 'disinterested' arbitrator in the giving? Is the artist, as giver, offering an authoritarian generosity? The legitimization of art could be validated, or not, in the ambiguous gestures of giving and receiving, since the act could be reciprocated or refuted. Therefore, how could the work of art exist or be legitimized if there was no reciprocation or no exchange? Considering the gift as a work of art, these questions circulate in this text in relation to the issue of power, with respect to the artist-audience and in the quotidian the gestures of giving and receiving.

The descriptions in this paper articulate my work and are designed to be hooks into the larger discussion of the work of art as if a gift. They refer to specific characteristics in the projects related to gestures of giving and receiving, but each of which could be read on multiple levels.

## Theoretical Framework

This research circulates within the paradoxical nature of the gift; through acts of giving and receiving that are central to my practice. This paradox references the double edge of selfless connectivity and imposed invitation, and in terms of labour, issues a challenge to restricted economies<sup>3</sup> as an autonomous act. This is achieved by living in the economy of the useful as a superfluous act, surpassing it and making it work, as theorized by Georges Bataille's conjecture in his General Economy.

These paradoxical characteristics are essential components in my interventionist, performative practice, based on the notion of intervention as a *gift of resistance*, referencing Gregory Sholette. The social dimension of the gift is reaffirmed through notions of community as formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy, who argues that we are brought into the world according to a dimension of in-common that is co-originary and co-extensive. Within my larger investigation, I address the dimensions associated with the gift as a symbolic expenditure, as a contribution to social capital, and as institutionalized ritual.

The projects that are part of this investigation are linked through a notion I define as the *offering economy*, a phrase that evokes both the act of making an offer and the social dimension of rituals as well as the investment and personal risk accruing to the offering act through which such rituals materialize. This conception takes its cue from the

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3 systems that are organized around a logic of process and growth

theories mentioned above and from the ceremony of the *potlatch* as studied by Marcel Mauss. The notions underlying these theories and interconnecting threads between them are developed in this section.

### ***The Enigmatic Gift***

Marcel Mauss was a French sociologist, sanskrit scholar and historian of religions. He constructed the *model of the potlatch* in his influential book *Essai sur le don*, in which he provided an account of the beliefs and ceremonies of different cultures. Mauss explained that *potlatch* is a Chinook word taken from the Native cultures of the Pacific Northwest of Canada, that originally meant ‘to nourish’ or ‘to consume’, representing a ceremony of killing and redistribution of wealth. Mauss studied this ceremony as it was practiced in the 19th century by West Coast cultures such as the Eskimo of West Alaska, the Yuit, the Koryak, Chukchee, Tinglit and Haida. These rituals, based on gift relationships, consisted of impressively serious festivals, that relayed glory, prestige, power, risk, status and revenge. One of two groups, in ostentatious ceremony, would offer gifts to the other group for the express purpose of showing superiority. They stand in opposition bound by a combined spirit of hostility and friendship. The recipient group was obliged to reciprocate the gifting within a certain period and ideally surpass it, if possible. The cultural historian Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*, investigates the playful character of the *potlatch*, referring to it as a “gift ritual”:

In the potlatch one proves one's superiority not merely by the lavish prodigality of one's gifts but, what is even more striking, by the wholesale destruction of one's possessions just to show that one can do without them. These destructions, too, are executed with dramatic ritual and are accompanied by haughty challenges. (59)

These ritualistic festivities were a temporary refuge from everyday life, when the participants returned to their daily activities and their social order was rearranged. The festival dominated the entire communal life of the society. As a religious celebration, it was an experience which both purified and renewed society simultaneously. Roger Caillois refers to this condition as a "paroxysm of society" arguing that it is an occasion for the circulation of wealth, of important trading and of prestige gained through the distribution of reserves (Caillois qtd. in Schechner 48)

### ***General Economy***

Georges Bataille's theories emerge in large part from his study of Mauss. Both begin with research on anthropological history leading to theories on the gift that coincide in their study of the *potlatch*. In his analysis of this ceremony, Bataille illustrates his theory of *general economy* which reflects on the *surplus*, the excess of energy governing living matter and which is destined to be its *useless* consumption. And according to Bataille, this is a societal principle. He reflects how in the *potlatch* power is acquired through loss, since this power is characterized as a power to lose and it is through loss that glory and honour were linked to wealth. "In the actual ceremony of the *potlatch* the gift was considered as a loss and thus as a partial destruction, since the desire to destroy

is in part transferred onto the recipient.” (Bataille Reader 173) Bataille suggests that *human activity* uses the minimum energy necessary for the conservation of life and that it is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation. He says that part of human life and energy accounts for the so-called *unproductive expenditures*, which are based on consumption. He gives as example; festivals, luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, the *arts*, among others. He remarks that these practices, “have no end beyond themselves,” and “the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for the activity to take its true meaning.” Accordingly, he argues, such practices satisfied “the need to destroy and lose.” (Bataille Reader 169)

Bataille refers to art as a symbolic expenditure, and says that poetry is an expression of a state of loss which can be considered synonymous with expenditure: “it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of *sacrifice*.” (Bataille Reader 171) His notion of general economy is opposed to what he called restricted economies “systems which are functionalist and accumulative in nature and organized around the logic of process and growth.” (Lee xv)

The idea of the gift as related to general economy is linked in Jean-Luc Nancy’s and Bataille’s *oeuvre* with the social dimensions of gift giving. “The notion of the universal surplus becomes apparent from the point of view of the collective whole.” (Shershow 223) Scott Cuttler Shershow argues that the site of *general economy* is ‘community’ and is what Nancy calls ‘being in common’, experienced as being-outside-



of-a-self. “In Bataille’s terms: being itself is constituted by restricted, finite beings who enter into, as their basic condition of possibility, a general economy of exposing, presenting and **offering**—a *giving* that is always and only *sharing*.” (Shershow 223)

Gift-giving exceeds the giver and the subject exceeds himself or herself at the very moment of giving, when the giver experiences the finite transcendence and the subject finds-itself-beyond-itself. Thus, community exists and as the site for general economy. It is the common ground for acts of giving and receiving. In the ritual of the *potlatch*, the gift’s power was acquired from the act of losing and as an antagonistic act, instigated by daring and eliciting ripostes.<sup>4</sup>

By observing their processes we can reflect on how our antithetical and/or agonistic existences are estimated in processes of similarities and differences that we enact when we are exposed, presented and offered to one another in our attempts to be recognized. Jean-Luc Nancy states:

...that singular beings are, present themselves, and appear only to the extent that they compear (*comparaissent*), to the extent that they are exposed, presented, offered to one another. This compearance (*comparution*) is not something added onto their being; rather, their being comes into being in it.” (Nancy 58)

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4 Claire Bishop in her essay *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* based her notion of antagonism in the lead from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theories who understand subjectivity as split and decentered. In their concept of antagonism they refer to a democratic society as one in which “not all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased.” (See Bishop 65-70)

For Nancy, immanence is an attempt to transcend the limits of being. The *general economy* of our *being-in common* is never complete, “sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompleteness.” (Nancy 35) In its very essence, the process of resistance involves a relationship between immanence and transcendence, between ontic and ontological, between becoming and being. “Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence.” (35)

### ***Gifts of Resistance***

The social practice theorist Gregory Sholette has articulated interventionist art as a gift of resistance. This complements Bataille’s notion of *general economy* as an un-productive form, as a vital experience not strictly determined by the economic law. Sholette’s interventionist treatise is also lodged in theories of the everyday, where the tactician “disappears into its own action, as though lost in what it does, including strolling, conversing, slacking-off, shopping, or perhaps shoplifting.” (de Certeau qtd. in Sholette 147) Sholette refers to this kind of practice as a “playful labour that manifests by not producing, or not intentionally producing...and spent killing time, or on itself, or on friends, or friends of friends.” (148) It is an informal disbursement which is eccentric, even ecstatic, and as Sholette notes, is “closer to Bataille’s general economy, without precise utility - the very abomination of capitalist laws that are based on accumulation, profit and calculated scarcity.”

Interventionist<sup>5</sup> practice constructs a non-space and non-productivity social yield

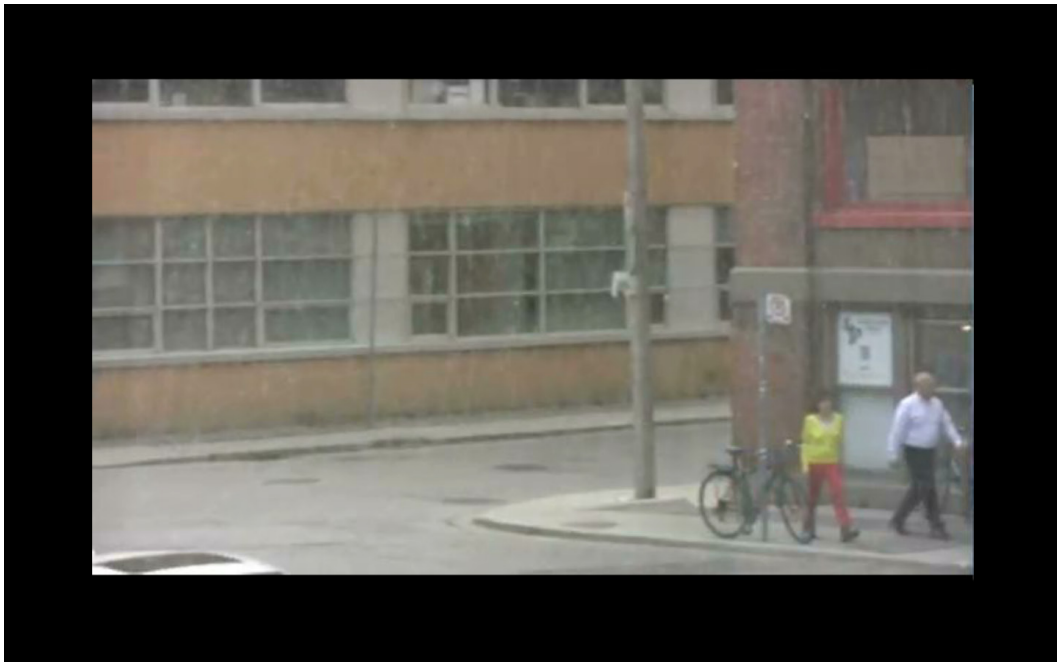
“generating filters contrary to those of the market.” (188)

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5 Bruce Barber traces the origin of the term intervention in the discourse of art to the works of Karl Marx, to his famous *11th Thesis on Feuerbach* (1845), in which he argued that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Then he gives as backdrop the essay *The Author as Producer* by Walter Benjamin (the playwright Brecht’s contemporary) in which he extolled the virtues of the *operative artist*, providing as his example the communist author Sergei Tretyakov “whose mission was not simply to report but to struggle, not to play the spectator but to *intervene actively*.” In the late 1950’s the International Situationists (I.S) endorsed Benjamin’s and Brecht’s operative/interventional projects for artists, advocating for intervention as a post-theoretical and practical aspect for the critique of the society of the spectacle.

***cabMood***

This project is situated on city streets, focussed on the possible interactions that can take place between myself and the pedestrians. As a performative gesture, I offer my company to people passing by, as if I were a human taxi. I am dressed wearing bright colourful clothes and proposing to go with them from one place to another. This is a strategy to exchange some words and try to establish a temporal bond. I draw information from the shelves of city architecture and from the people who circulate on them. New discoveries are added every day from the lexicon of shared experiences drawn from the exchanges of my own desires and goals and from the people who engage with me. This piece is an exploration of the notions of private vs public and the right to the city. The following text focuses on the aesthetic as a gift-giving practice and expands on some of the reasons why and how this project relates to my personal story.



**Figure 1.** *cabMood*. Video still. Digital video, 14:30 min. 2011

The Situationists, in their *1953 Formulaire: our urbanism nouveau* manifesto suggested the use of an intensive propaganda of desires. The members of the group signed a program “without common measure,” and these attempts gave direction to the publication of the informal bulletin: *Potlatch*. One of their main queries was “is it possible to practice a sumptuary gift giving, that requires the giving in turn of other gifts, which had been the basis of an Economy of Pre-Colombian America?” (Bertolino 317)

The Situationists elaborated a theory of everyday resistance as an anti-capitalist cultural practice. They espoused an alternative economy based on the concept of the *potlatch*, aiming at new ways of organization and exchange. The *dérive* was a tactic they employed to recognize and interpret the urban text. This practice consisted of experimenting with the affective variants of the urban environment, brought about by walking around a city and systematically exploring it.

The Situationist art practices are a good example of “art produced in the 1960-1970s and its presumptions that dematerialization = anticommodity.” (Kwon 94) The art historian Miwon Kwon argues that nowadays the denial of the object form is *not* an automatic challenge to the abstraction of commodity exchange anymore, since these art categorizations are commonplace in today’s art market. However, Kwon proposes to look at the art of these periods with the gift as frame of reference. According to Kwon, the art movements of the 1960-1970s that engaged this logic complicated or parodied the dominant market and profit-based system of exchange by using the gift economy as a strategy. In her model she includes participatory artworks that function as a mechanism

to instigate social exchanges or interactions that specifically put into motion a circuit of obligation and reciprocity, typically involved in giving, receiving or accepting, and giving in return. She suggests that everything connected to this kind of art tests each person's sense of honour and dishonour, power, risk, fear, status, humiliation and prestige.<sup>6</sup> Kwon uses performance based work as a means to illustrate how dematerialized art operates as a gift: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, Valie Export's *Touch Cinema*, Piero Manzoni's *Magic Pedestal*, Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* and Edward Kienholz's *Concept Tableaux*. Some of these pieces exemplify the performative side of the gift as a ritualistic practice which encourages social solidarity to manage conflicts regarding status, power, space, resources, and sex among others. Kwon remarks that in this kind of participatory art, the artist ostensibly gives up his or her authorship to the audience, as if a gift.

Kwon's gift framework could be extended to any kind of art manifestation<sup>7</sup> and all the contradictions that this could imply.<sup>8</sup> If a work of art is the emanation of its maker's exposure, as if a gift, which is present bodily or through objects, the audience engagement consists in making meaning by activating the piece, or not, by introspectively reflecting on it, or not. Kwon cites Maurice Godelier's book *The Enigma of the Gift*, in which Godelier questions the two fold relationship between the giver and the receiver,

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6 operations that could be observed in the model of the potlatch

7 Lewys Hyde in his book *The Gift* has pointed to the "work of art as a gift" (xvi) and "the gift proved to be a key conceptual site for a continuing avant-garde critique" (Shershow 6)

8 Ted Purves in 2005 edited a book called *What We Want is Free* and many of the contributors expressed their concern regarding how the term generosity has been used lately in contemporary art practice. They argued that the concept of generosity "assumes a hierarchical structure between the giver and the recipient." (Svensson 47)

suggesting that the gift decreases the distance between protagonists because it is a form of sharing, and increases the social distance because one is now indebted to the other. If that is the case, one could ask: whether the art maker puts the viewer or participant into a perpetual debt or are both parts indebted to one another? Through what channels does participatory art, create and inspire agency in its audience?

The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu argues that the generous act performed by institutions or companies is based on asymmetrical relationships of interdependence of authority and control:

Thus, through redistribution, taxation enters into a cycle of symbolic production in which economic capital is transformed into symbolic capital<sup>9</sup>. As in the potlatch, redistribution is necessary in order to secure recognition of the distribution. (239)

Jacques Rancière argues that behind the political redistribution of shared experience the relationship between aesthetics and politics has common forms of visibility and organization, allowing them to coexist. (17-18) Thus “Bourdieu’s theories can be applied to the art system as normative structured dispositions yet containing within its most progressive practices the possibility of redemption and liberation.<sup>10</sup>”

(Barber web)

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9 “Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic “capital,” which represents an intangible, yet powerful, source of economic and political wealth, and contends that “the gift” in fact constitutes a central economic force in late capitalist society.” (Kranyak 43)

10 Bruce Barber, who has been theorizing interventionist art within the gift framework since the mid 1990’s



Gift giving “as challenge makes it possible to risk making a move toward the other while compelling the other to risk making a move in return.” (Hénaff 136)

It is a venture, a chance, based on the possibility of going *outside-of-a-self* while anticipating recognition, but there is also the danger of being ignored, rejected or attacked. For the philosopher Marcel Hénaff this concept of challenge is what makes the concept of gift exchange *ostentatious*. But the vulnerability of generosity is unveiled when the gift is not accepted or rejected. However, according to Pierre Bourdieu, non-response is still a response.

The non-response aspect relates to this piece and is a trope for how I felt when I moved to Canada almost eleven years ago; walking up and down the street going nowhere, since I did not have any specific place to go. A couple of years later when I was more settled and after my son was born I started to take taxis and had many nice chats with the drivers, who were also recent immigrants. We would have conversations about our vulnerability; about living in Canada, the challenges and the benefits. We would talk about ‘home’ and as the conversations deepened, sometimes we would talk about more personal things. These conversations inspired me to create a video piece in which I recorded myself walking on the surrounding streets of the university campus, pretending I was a human taxi. In this video I wear bright colourful clothes, red pants and a yellow cardigan. The first image is a long shot, thus it is difficult to see me in between the buildings, sidewalk, cars and the other pedestrians but in subsequent shots I appear and disappear and it is more easy to identify me. The following story relates the genesis of the idea.

### *Story*

Everything started the day I began to behave as if I were a taxi. Walking back and forth from one street to another, making a left and a right and never getting any clients. Even though I was wearing bright colourful clothes, nobody ever approached me. I didn't know if it was me, being excessively shy or if people on the street didn't need company at that time. Honestly, I felt anxious about the situation, hated the job and constantly questioned why I behaved in such stupid way. Someone told me once, if you become a red and yellow vehicle, it will be very hard to be anything else when you want to change but I was very attracted to the nomadic life. On the other hand, there were some exceptional days as well, when the sun was shining and I enjoyed my new occupation which I had created to amuse myself. It was a good way to get to know the city and mentally rehearse my new role as a transient missionary. I told myself that if I get a client one day, I will ask her how her day has been. In the meantime I will continue practicing my turns - weaving in and out of traffic, making sure my brakes and windshield wipers work. This non-place is my constant mental state. *End of story\**

Amelia Jones in her essay *Post(urban) self image* makes an analysis of the art made by LA immigrant artists. In this text, she describes these artists' explorations of the urban landscape as a scenario, the "knowable" site of disorientation:

The city is an experience in and through the body acting as a new kind of social space... producing a different city, offering other ways of seeing which provide other versions of postmodern posturban subjectivity. This posturban subject is nostalgic.

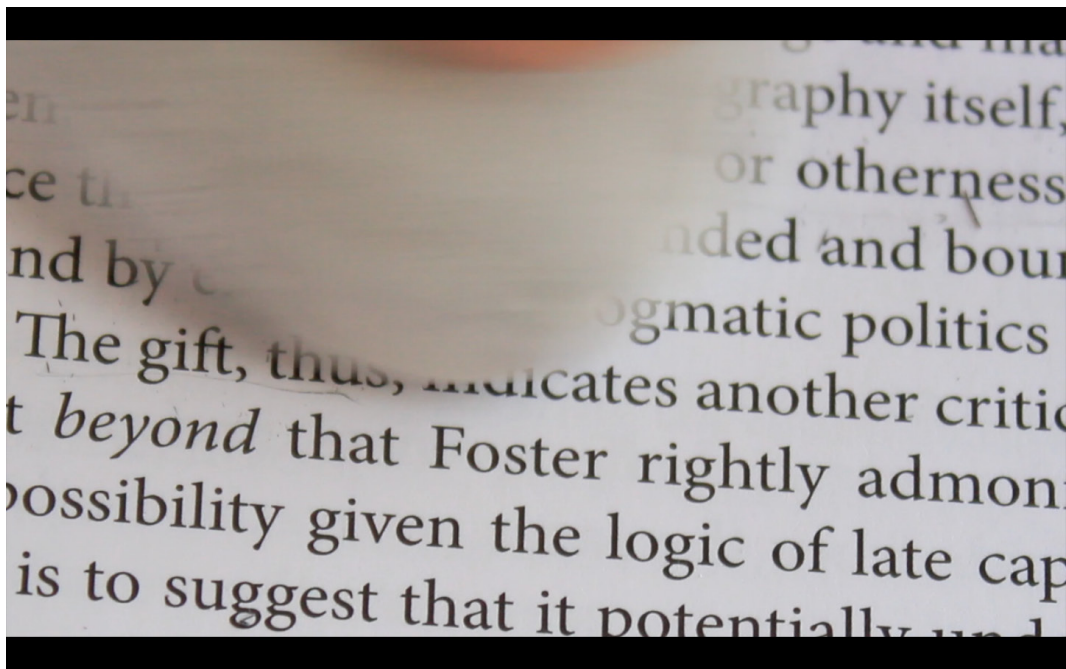
As an immigrant I feel that I am part of the movement of people that globalization has brought to many cities around the world, a workforce that is from ‘somewhere else.’ Sometimes I think that I merely moved to a distant and cold neighbourhood since one could even drive from Mexico to Toronto. *cabMood* points to the circumstances of subjects of global capitalism as outlined by Jones: the inexorable rootlessness, the sense of bodily and psychic dislocation, that logic of surveillance operating through a seemingly centralized source of power. This piece pivots around what Jones defined as “melancholic subject” taking from Laura Marks: “Eliciting the melancholic subject who is not reluctant to celebrate the “loss of self” and its *reconfiguration* and *redistribution*.” (Marks qtd. in Jones 114)

This piece manifests in the gallery in two ways; as a the video I have previously made and as a performance in which the audience is invited to see from within the gallery out through the window, which serves as a screen, framing the immediate urban landscape.

### ***The Emancipatory Gift***

This piece is an ongoing intervention that I have been doing in libraries in Toronto, Canada. My main objective is to perform a gift in the form of service by erasing the comments written in the margins of books and the pencil underlinings of words and passages. I interact with the appropriation of the text that previous readers have actualized to their specific situations. By writing in the borrowed books, they take these objects both as a site and as object, which is mirrored in what I do. They inhabit the text, furnishing it with their acts and memories, turning it into metaphors and ellipses of their own quest. By deleting these innovations that have infiltrated the text, my intention is to point to them, hopefully allowing new forays.

The following description addresses how processes of writing and reading could be read as gifts, by measures of significance and meaning, that they both *find-itself-beyond-itself*, and open one another in the offering of the self.



**Figure 2.** *The Emancipatory Gift*. Video still. Digital Video, 53:28 min. 2011

Jacques Rancière argues that the inegalitarian principle of the social distance between the author and the reader is granted by the rules imposed on the *text*. The author-reader distance is controlled by the ways we have conceived the interrelated notions between viewing/knowing, acting/passivity, appearance/reality<sup>11</sup>. “They specifically define a distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions. They are embodiments of inequality.” (Rancière 12) The idea of authorship is associated with ownership since in our society the actual system that regulates texts treats them as properties. This system, which began emerging in the Middle Ages with English Empiricism, French Rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, was dominant by the turn of the nineteenth century. The notion of the “author” is a modern idea and the product of a society which constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, imposed by the generation of a productivist technocracy. (Foucault, 101 Barthes, 142-143, De Certeau)

Once a series of events is legally controlled then it can be corrupted “writing unfolds like a game (jeu) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits.” (Foucault 102) The author is constantly violating the rules and usurping control. “The author is systematically practicing transgression and thereby restoring danger to a writing which was now guaranteed the benefits of ownership.” (108-109)

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11 In his text *The Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière expands describing how these modes of perception belong to the *distribution of the sensible* which are forms of participation in a common world, that are specific and established modes of understanding allowed. “Strictly speaking, ‘distribution’ therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion. The ‘sensible’, of course, does not refer to what shows good sense or judgment but to what is *aisthēton* or capable of being apprehended by the senses.” (85)

The *text* points to its creator in which this transgression is largely well hidden yet, most significantly, the act of writing serves as means to create a space “into which the writing subject constantly disappears.” (Foucault 102) The space where writing is dispersed and unfolds is created for and by the reader. The reader is the objective of the text. It is the space in which all punctuations that make up a written work are addressed. Reading elevates the circulation of ideas in which the gift of writing cannot be minimized to the author-reader relationship. The gift of *reading* is an “expenditure signification which consumes modes of commodification and exchange, laying waste to them in a wasteful presentation of the waste that is their own.” (Bataille Reader 2) Both writer and reader coincide in something that is and is not there in the form of spaces and words.

Writing and reading are both expenditure acts in which the two different presences never cross. Michel de Certeau writes about this relationship:

It spells out an absence that is its precondition and its goal. It proceeds by successive abandonments of occupied places, and it articulates itself on an exteriority, that eludes it, on its addressee come from abroad, a visitor who is expected but never heard on the scriptural paths that the travels for a desire have traced on the page. (195)

In his text *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière reconstructs the system of assumptions that place the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relationship between art and politics. He argues, “being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing... Second, it is the opposite of acting:

the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power of act.” (2) He articulates the need for a different set of associations related to the social distance in actor-spectator relations, specifically on the passive optical relationship that is understood from the notion of being an audience. He discusses how in the modern attempts to reform theatre, there is a tendency in which the viewer abdicates his position and actively participates in the *drama*.<sup>12</sup> Rancière writes:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing, themselves belong to the structure and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of oppositions... The spectator also acts... observes, selects, compares, interprets. (13)

The reader or spectator, is an active participant in the *drama* offered to him or her, the *text*. The activity of reading is not characterized as that of a silent consumption. A reader mentally transforms the meanings deduced by the words, physically writes notes on the page and underlines important ideas contained in certain passages and sections, folding corners of pages as reminders. These ephemeral series of movements are embodied by the reader, *someone* who completes fragments of enunciations and blank spaces, as a destination “without history, biography, psychology” (Barthes 148) It is the addressee, the *actor* who custom-tailors the elements given in the *text*, contrasting and

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12 For Rancière drama means action



relating to them with her or his own history, dreams and passions. The reader unconsciously plays within the fixed limits of time and place imposed by the author-reader configuration. “The ruling order serves as support for innumerable productive activities” (De Certeau, xxii) The reader employs tactics of improvisation which stimulate new and innumerable discoveries. Both the author and the reader get absorbed in the consumption and squandering of the *text*. Reading is everything at the same time, emancipation, redistribution, consumption, nourishment and loss, and the same applies to writing. These logics exclude the common assumption that being a spectator or a reader is an ignorant, passive inability.

According to Rancière, in the substance of emancipation between the author and the reader, (the actor and the spectator), there is a third thing, *a book or some other piece of writing* which gives testimony to what the addressee has seen, with her or his specific modes of circulation, valorization and attribution.

My focus in this piece is on the capacity of the appropriation of anonymous people as portrayed in the graffitied pages of these books. They have colonized the space, that was meant to allow rest for the eye. These spectators and readers have played the role of active interpreters. They have physically abandoned their position as passive observers, adding their comments which are inscribed on these pages. My labour consists in deleting their trail which adds meaning to the text. These annotations that remain in between lines and at the margins are some of the possibilities where the text could expand and the testimony or evidence of how the text is taken up.

This project evolved on one hand from my experience as a layout book designer and on the other, from my visits to the libraries. Editorial design is a field that has fed me since I graduated from university, in both Mexico and Canada. My job consisted of designing textbooks in which people were permitted to write. The designer has special considerations in laying out the pages of these kind of books since you have to create a suitable space for people to execute the instruction they are asked to perform. The age of the user is another important factor to consider. When I started going to the library to do this investigation I was captivated by the comments and annotations people do on the circulating books, even though they are not invited to write on them. Another factor that motivated this piece is the transition of the reading of texts from paper to screen. In recent years, book publishing has undergone major changes— the sale of books has largely migrated to the internet and the very form of the printed page, the major platform for the printed word in the last millennium, seems now waning in favour of electronic formats (Robayo Sheridan 2) In *The Emancipatory gift*, I translate printed pages of the books I used in my research to the screen by recording them with a video camera, mimicking the movement of the platform shift that texts are undergoing. But, it is a futile attempt since not a single coherent text can be deciphered in the resulting videos. For the exhibition, I again borrow some of these books from the library and exhibit them along with the video series as part of the piece.

### ***Belle de nuit***

My main goal is to keep in circulation the tape recording of a song that was gifted to me by a friend. The song is continuously re-recorded through various communication devices. As I transfer the song from one electronic device to another, the fidelity of the song is continuously lost. My intention is to mimic the incessant change of format that music has undergone in recent years. I am interested in exploring the deterioration of the sound as a metaphor for my relationship with my friend. In the following lines, I address how as a sculptural piece, *Belle the nuit*, attempts to be a channel for expansion and contraction of matter through sound. It extends the particles of these vibrations to keep this gift alive through its retransmission and redistribution. The piece is exhibited as a sound piece alongside a walltext list that describes the process of the unmaking:

### ***Belle de nuit***

From cassette tape player to  
 cassette voice tape recorder  
 cellphone  
 digital camera  
 public phone  
 home phone recorder  
 laptop  
 cellphone  
 digital camera  
 public phone  
 cassette voice tape recorder  
 desktop computer  
<http://soundcloud.com/ritakamacho/belledenuit-audio>



**Figure 3.** *Belle de nuit*. Digital photography. 11 x 17." 2011

Rituals are associated with gestures of giving and receiving because *the giver places his own person at risk in what he gives*, and he gives in it a part of himself.

“The thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of her. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary...

To make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself.”

(Hénaff 127)

Lewis Hyde in his well known book *The Gift*, discusses the dialectic of giving and receiving, central to the gift exchange. Hyde identifies in the gift exchange what he calls the vector of increase, an increment that stays in motion and follows the object. He concurs that the gift must always move, so that “whatever we are given is supposed to be given away again, not kept.” (4) The gift is a stream, and people are its channels, that keep it alive by constant donation. The gift also “must always be used up, consumed, eaten. *The gift is property that perishes.*” (10) Hyde addresses the fact that the gift is given with no warranty of anything in return.

He recognizes that gift exchange can take place between two people, but identifies that this is the most direct and simplest form. At this point we can observe that gift exchange is an indication of the difficulties of friendship since there is a constant expectation of what the person will give in return. The uncertain temporal duration that follows the offering of a gift until it is reciprocated makes the exchange appear as a disconnected series of events. This interval serves to “make gift exchange viable and acceptable by

facilitating and favouring self-deception, a lie told to oneself...” making misunderstanding possible in the exchange. (Bourdieu 232)

Joel Robbins, in his essay *Rethinking Gift and Commodities*, argues that the modern notion of recognition is fundamental to social life and comes originally from Hegel. He recalls Hegel’s famous discussion of the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “the person’s coming into being as a self-conscious subject requires that he/she recognizes another person and be recognized by him/her in return” (45) Robbins goes on to explain that key to this model is a three part-structure, to be in accordance with a subject you must acknowledge the other, the other must acknowledge your recognition, and the other must recognize you in return. In Robbins’ hypothesis, the anthropological idea of reciprocity<sup>13</sup> developed by Mauss is paired with Hegel’s theory of recognition. He bases this claim on the fact that both reciprocity and recognition have a similar three-part rhythm, in both “something (the gift/recognition) must be given to the other, must be received by the other (who thereby acknowledges his/her worthiness as subject) and must be matched by a return from the other (who thereby recognizes the worthiness of the giver as subject.” (46) Robbins emphasizes that each partner plays all three roles (giver, receiver and reciprocator) and that if there is any asymmetry in the relationship, things fall apart.

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13 As in the ritual of the potlatch as described in the theoretical framework of this document.

The recuperation of this song is inscribed in the very idea of the gift and its displacement, that inhabit the attempt to represent a *general economy*<sup>14</sup> of loss without return. Some years ago I maintained an intensive mail correspondence with a good friend of mine through “little gifts” that tied up our friendship for several months. There was a constant uncertainty in the lapse of time while waiting for her packages to arrive. Our exchanges function within the logic of “surprise” or “spontaneous gesture”. I did not preserve the letters and other things she sent me, with the exception of a tape she recorded for me containing a wide variety of songs. I keep the gift extant by re-appropriating a specific song contained on the tape and actively disintegrating its sound, as a manner of preservation. In the tradition of *process* art, my interest lies in repeating this task to performative exhaustion, dissipation and loss, through an absurd self imposed labour.

Pamela M. Lee, in her book *Objects to be Destroyed*, argues that the notion of entropy is one of the most important critical categories in Robert Smithson’s thinking, which serves as historical backdrop to *process art*. Lee explains that at the beginning of the late sixties some artists started to formulate a theory and practice of art that concentrated less on the making of the art and was concerned more with an art that revealed the *process* of its making, or *unmaking*.

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14 *General Economy*, as discussed in the theoretical framework of this essay, assumes surplus, consumption, sacrifice and reckless expenditures, according to Bataille. And if, in some obvious sense, “the general economy is at least associated with an economy of the gift, it also seeks to name a certain transgression of the limits of economic reason itself.” (Shershow 83)

Lee argues that the work bore a markedly *disintegrative* aesthetic by internalizing the pull of gravity in its design. Artists such as Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Richard Serra, Mel Bochner, Eva Hesse, in their respective ways, were working towards process-based art work. This paralleled theoretical investigations in mid-nineteenth century physics based on the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The law of entropy, which is a dissipating force within the universe, drives the physical world from a system of order to maximal disorder. Lee remarks that the temporal dimension of entropy is understood as irreversible, correlating to the progressive disintegration of form. She writes that Smithson was concerned with the temporal nature of the entropic and its surface effects, emphasizing objects that appear to configure “an inactive history” or an “energy drain,” “time decay or de-devolution.” (Lee 40)

Judith A. Gray in her essay *The Law of Entropy and Dance* argues that “as entropy increases, the universe and all its systems tend naturally to deteriorate and to lose their distinctiveness, to move from the least probable state and to egress from a state of organization and differentiation to a state of chaos and sameness.” (48) But significantly, Gray argues that we can work within the time range and delay or control entropy’s erosive tendency as long as we can. “An interesting property of entropy is the fact that any change in which entropy has increased cannot be reversed without any input of energy.” (47)

Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in their famous essay *A User’s Guide to Entropy* refer to the act of *tearing*, as another essentially entropic process which is



irreversible. They illustrate this notion with the work of the artist Lygia Clark to address the concept of *tearing*. However they say “it is not an issue of tearing of work, but of tearing up the concept of work.” (70) For Clark the point of departure is to tear up a Mobious paper strip, a process which she calls ‘trailing’. Clark’s comments on her tearing piece read as nothing left on the floor but a pile of paper spaghetti that one can put in the trash so as not to plug the WC.

The breakdown of a friendship is certainly an irreversible process, however not in the sense of thermodynamics. Nevertheless the process of *unmaking* I employ by destroying the sound of this piece is irreparable. My interest in the preservation of this song is to set in motion what has been its inactive history by keeping the gift moving, exploring in relationships how we risk part of the self in order to be recognized. One of the strategies I use to keep this gift alive is by tearing it up, an essentially entropic process; trailing and tracking the shapes and forms that these sounds become in one section of their path. This is a celebration that consumes unproductively by accelerating its decay as non-instrumental play.

## Methodology

*Research Design.* In this investigation-based practice, my studies of organizational learning were created in accordance with the research design *Pragmatic Paradigm* by John W. Creswel and Shawn McNiff's *Art-based Research* model. According to Creswel the *pragmatic paradigm* design opens the door to multiple methods, different world views, and different assumptions. (10-11) One of the Creswel model's strategies of inquiry is *transformative mixed methods* which I use as a way to unite theories on the gift with my topics of interest: everyday gestures of giving-receiving and artist-audience relationships. The interdisciplinary engagement I have towards my practice and theoretical inquiries is substantiated through the constructs I selected as main sources, which are gift principles that are in relation to deconstruction, philosophy, anthropology and economics knowledge.

The *art-based research* method of inquiry proposed by McNiff engages an integrated "use of varied and sometimes contradictory materials and ideas." (49) His proposal relies on the creative possibility that emerges based on the combination and new relations of multiple factors that exist in complete isolation from one another, as well as a systematic integration of empirical and introspective methods. McNiff cites Kant to illustrate how his philosophical tradition strived to integrate the empirical and introspective ways of reasoning. He explains that in the Kantian system *a priori judgments* were considered to have an inherent perspective or bias and this is what

we understand now as paradigms and frameworks. In McNiff's method, heuristic legitimations are strategies for the generation of knowledge.

The Greek word 'heuriskein' means to discover and find. Today heurism connotes a method of learning through which knowledge is discovered through an inquiry based upon the examination of personal experience. (53)

Conventional strategies of inquiry have the tendency to make the investigation as impersonal as possible and usually the subjective perspective is considered pejorative to research. According to McNiff, personal experience becomes a primary feature of heuristics which encourage the telling of personal stories. In my own projects and as proposed by McNiff, I expanded these strategies by introducing materials of creative expression and studying external phenomena as well as dialogue with the objects that were part of my experimental and practical process. I gave attention to personal motivations for selecting particular choices in themes and objects. In each of these projects it was a hard process to get to the point of choosing the most neutral term to keep the conversation going, which is an essential condition of reflexivity.

The common strategies and methods I use in my Master Thesis projects are performance and play, body, site, space, and mimicry. I outline my specific tactics in the following paragraphs:

*Performance and play.* In my own practice, performance as a medium has helped me to test ideas and bring them to life, allowing me to express feelings and concerns at

personal and cultural levels. Performance's malleability and magical plasticity has let me present it in galleries and on street corners. Play is a strategy I use as method of production in the performative trait. The historian Johan Huizinga wrote in his studies on playing:

Play is voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that is "different" from "ordinary" life. (28)

I usually have intermittent periods of time to produce my own work. I use a mixture of concentration and lightness that allows me to be playful. The word intuition is related to the immediate and also with the notion of truth. Intuition is related with the here and now; it is an inbuilt condition of playing. When one hears the word play, one usually thinks about fictitious engagement, the fantasy involved while playing. Nevertheless, when one plays, diverse realities collide that are intrinsically related to cultural conventions. Play is an unsettling element that brings possibilities to everyday life and which could be employed as a manner of resistance. "Play is one of the main bases of civilization in which art is an integral part of this process. Art is the realm in which we are allowed to play. We need to play, adapt and evolve." (Huizinga 117) Playing underlies everyday life and suddenly appears. It is when I get things done and enjoy my duty but if I forget I am playing, things start to get complicated. However,

struggle is an essential component of playing. Playing allows me to exist within several levels of consciousness and to simultaneously create with my artistic labour in an ongoing process of construction, deconstruction, creation and destruction.

I take as part of my strategy the standpoint of performance theory that “anything and everything can be studied “as” performance.” (Schechner 1) It informs my practice since my intention is to address how objects and spaces have their own performative condition, which is related to the perception and relationship with the audience. I use performance as a vehicle of exploration to engage with interventionist methods that mimic post-industrial services.

My interest in this pursuit is to question the distinctions between artist-object, viewer-audience, and time-space.

*Body.* Using the body as a site for the exploration of memories, experiences and cultural backgrounds. Carrying actions, restoring the subject, not as object but as an embodied subject.

*Space.* Referring to this concept as built by the accumulation of several layers over time: ideas, processes, actors, people, and environments that overlap one with another and thus re-create space. The layers that make up these spaces are not unique. There are always fragments of diverse realities.

*The Site.* The notion of site is used as a cultural framework, emphasizing what Richard Schechner argues, that one cannot determine what “is” a performance without referring to specific cultural circumstances. (15) The nature of the site allowed me to

examine the ties between subject/object and location, exploring the intrinsic link of interventionist art to the site in which it takes place. The site of a page, of streets and that produced by a song—each of these sites produce constructions of alternative realities in the everyday life in such a way that they are almost imperceptible. Therefore my intention is to construct a kind of interventionist practice identified by Gregory Sholette as invisible, plastic and even unnameable. To wed theory to practice and to construct situations in which I put theory into action and vice versa.

## Summary

This investigation is initially framed by the anthropological model of the *gift* as postulated by Mauss and the philosophical thought contained in Bataille's theories of *general economy*. I connected the latter with philosophies of *being in common* as argued by Nancy.

*cabMood* is a participatory piece, thus I discuss in that section how this kind of art has been framed with theories on the gift, such as in the model proposed by Miwon Kwon, which I extend to understand the aesthetics as a kind of gift-giving gesture. *cabMood* is a performative intervention and participatory piece in which I explore the risk and personal investment that occur when we communicate with each other. I connect Amelia Jones' ideas of the loss of self and its *reconfiguration* and *redistribution* through the notion of the *melancholic subject*.

In *The Emancipatory Gift* section, I use the *active spectator* model as proposed by Jacques Rancière to address how the notions of author-reader are constructs of modern society, nevertheless they can be gifts as the reader and the author get absorbed in their duty, enjoying the autonomy and subversion from the configuration they have inserted. My focus is on the readers who have played the role of active interpreters by physically interacting with pages of the books.

In *Belle de nuit* I use Joel Robbins' model, in which he pairs the anthropological idea of reciprocity developed by Mauss with Hegel's theory of recognition, to understand the modern notion of recognition, which is essential in the gestures of giving and receiving.



## Conclusions

*Parts and Wholes, the Gift* began as an investigation of the gift and remains as such. This project has captured glimpses within the speculative considerations of the theoretical frameworks surrounding the gift. This research is based on the daily actions and investments between individuals, objects and spaces. I strive to reflect and meditate further upon notions of the gift as a institutionalized ritual, as a symbolic transaction and as a labour in its challenge to the capitalized economy as an autonomous act.

In the process of writing and performing each of these pieces, I have developed a methodology to relate these very diverse projects, the *offering economy*, which is still undergoing development and conceptualization. I have formulated a way of considering practice through theory and theory through action. I have constructed this framework to comprehend the investment that is built around everyday gestures of giving-receiving and the work of art through the theoretical lens of the *offering economy*.

The *offering economy* is determined by the work of art that offers itself immovably. It could look like an *imposition*, especially when it requires the active participation of the spectator. The interest in the giving could appear as *disinterested* but, notwithstanding, it looks for a response. The art work could look *interested* if it is commodified, but most of the time that is not the case.

*Parts and Wholes, the Gift* is a thesis and artistic project that has led me to consider the conditions under which I strive in my own way of giving and receiving. The

original inspiration for the project was to discover and understand why artists have used gifting as a strategy. However, as the project evolved, I shifted the focus toward the study of the ceremony of the *potlatch*. This decision led me to an understanding of the gift as engaged in specific ritualistic practices, but I discovered as well that the gift is a model that has been used as a backdrop for many theories and ways of understanding.

The *offering economy* is my conceptually interrelated extension of Bataille's notion of *general economy*, Nancy's theories of being in common and the notion of the *gift of resistance* by Gregory Sholette. I propose with *Parts and Wholes, the Gift*, to firstly look at art through the theoretical lens of the gift to observe how the artist looks for recognition and response through their art. Secondly, I identified how the modern idea of the author affects the way we perceive the work of art. In writing and reading processes both the author and the reader recognize one another in the pages of a book. Lastly, my intention was to bring to the forefront how daily gestures of giving and receiving are processes inserted into recognition operations, like the work of art which needs to be put into motion to keep it alive. I hope my research has been of value through thoughtful examinations of the questions and the possibilities of how to look at the work of art through giving- receiving processes and through the lens of the gift.

This research can lead into further areas that expand the combination of methods and strategies I use and are complementary with the methodology of gift such as: play and gift, the performativity of gifts, the performance of gifts, the gift's site, play as resistance.

*Parts and Wholes, the Gift*, identifies the gift as an interdisciplinary study and a time to question how processes of recognition in the art system are related to forms of participation in a common world, which are at the same time associated with specific and established modes of understanding. Having completed this body of work and thesis, I can use my interventionist, performative practice, striving through further investigations of spatiality and materiality to create more complex parameters and frameworks for understanding the gift. I suggest that the *offering economy* is a model of investigation that can be used to understand any kind of art practice, which is a way of *being-in common*. They are *gifts* that can transgress the boundaries of time and space, in which the artist and spectator make an alliance and a partnership.

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**Appendix A: Documentation**

The following accompanying material is available upon request from the Ontario College of Art & Design Library.

**DVD**

Belledenuit.mp3. Duration 3:18 min

cabMood.mov. Duration 14:30 min

TheEmancipatoryGift.mov. Duration 29:54 min

Parts&WholesTheGift.PDF