

Helen Pitt Gallery
Vancouver

A Measure of Happiness - a roundtable discussion about alternative economies and possible models for enacting them

by Elizabeth Zvonar

A Measure of Happiness - a roundtable discussion about alternative economies and possible models for enacting them, took place February 28, 2004 at the Emily Carr Institute during the INFEST international conference on artist-run centres (www.paarc.ca/infest). The discussion was organized by Jeremy Todd and Elizabeth Zvonar in tandem with the Helen Pitt Gallery ARC group exhibition, Production, Consumption and Function – Exploring Alternative Economies (www.helenpittgallery.org/archive) in January of 2004.

The roundtable examined alternative spheres of social, economic and artistic activity and their relationship to existing hegemonic structures. Moderated by educator and writer Clint Burnham, the discussion featured social activist and independent business person, Richard Andrews, Finnslough Heritage and Wetland Society representative, David Dorrington, Ludicorp games designer Caterina Fake, CUSO representative, Carly Haddon, writer, Lou Parsons, Graham Sheard from Spartacus Bookshop and local artist Elizabeth Zvonar. Each speaker gave a brief introductory presentation on the kinds of alternate strategies they are using with the moderator who then posed questions and opened the table up to discussion.

The conversation was concerned primarily with utopic conceptions of social relations, how they might be constituted, and how they may be enacted in the face of current economic structures. The initial idea came from an interest in talking about the ways people find to live within the margins of a dominant Capitalist structure. The reality for many people living on fixed, marginal or contract incomes is the necessity to supplement day-to-day living via short cuts, tricks and intuition. The people chosen to speak come from a broad range of environments and experience yet a common thread that links these practices and ideas are the social networks and grassroots education systems inherent in their practical daily living environments.

The retail store was a recurring theme throughout the entire talk. Graham Sheard spoke about Spartacus Books (www.spartacusbooks.org) and he describes the 30 year old bookstore and resource centre as worker controlled, based on principles of consensus. The model that Spartacus uses is dependent on the fluctuating volunteer base which rests anywhere between 30-50 people and whom all have autonomy in decision making.

Our Community Bikes (OCB) is another retail store that subverts the conventional model, relying on a mix of volunteers and paid staff. Richard Andrews spoke about the OCB project and

the umbrella organization it falls under, PEDAL (Pedal Energy Development Alternatives - www.pedalpower.org), a group that promotes pedal power as a form of transportation and as an alternate energy application. OCB began in 1993 as a non-profit fix-all bike shop and grew into a retail space. It functions as both a bicycle recycling depot and educational workshop to those who wish to repair their own bikes. The shop has consciously adopted a model of social action that gives people the option to participate in the resolve of their own predicament. Because the model promotes self-sufficiency through education using the familiar environment of the retail store, it has a radical impact on the way people negotiate and engage as public participants. The simple restructuring of a common activity brings into question the static nature of how we are expected to behave and highlights the preconceptions of agency.

Both OCB and Spartacus as systems require one to unlearn hierarchical authority structures in order to navigate the spaces they offer. These models underscore the lazy gap that exists when people rescind control and then are compromised when faced with the weight of choice and responsibility.

Our Community Bikes has also instigated an educational relationship with local people and organizations in Guatemala, Cuba and Togo. They send bicycles, parts and demonstration workshops in an effort to give options to developing countries that have been dependent on the whims of Capitalism. The pedal power tricks that they pass on enhance indigenous practices and result in increased production and efficiency at the local level. This technology is shared with neighboring villages by the local population and succeeds in subverting the need for a bureaucratic stronghold. This tactic of decentralization promotes self-sufficiency, secures independence and steers the potential for positive change.

Carly Haddon was a speaker on the panel who had recently spent 6 months in Ghana, Africa as an Information and Communications Technology worker with 3 community organizations through CUSO, a Canadian organization that sends professionals to teach skills to developing countries. She spoke about her experiences in Africa and about the pros and cons of NGO's as she had become familiar through her experience. The way that people are organizing for change, from social networks to subversion of consumerism looks very different in a place where the majority of the population is exhausted by the history of Colonialism made worse by continuing Civil War and complicated by a monetarily deficient government. These factors inherently imply a layered and determined value system diametrically opposed to a conventional North American reading of value.

An exception to this can be found in the plight of a 100-year-old fishing village outside of Steveston on the south arm of the Fraser River in British Columbia. Historian and inhabitant David Dorrington of Finnslough Heritage and Wetlands Society (www.finnslough.com) spoke about the struggle with the Fraser Board to legally maintain the way of life for approximately 30 people who live in an autonomous village inside a larger urban setting. The value system he talks about is not money oriented. It is far more intricate and ties heritage inextricably to community and geography. Finnish settlers settled Finnslough in the early 1900's. The city of Richmond sold them the land and then denied them access to water in a move to dismantle what the city anticipated to be Socialist organizing. A precedent had been set with a larger settlement, Sointula in Malcolm Island. This was a Finnish initiative and one of the first attempts to start a Utopian

community in BC. Although this project failed, still it founded the oldest running co-op in British Columbia that continues today. The idea of value is strongly tied to the idea of the village, social activism and self-determination.

The idea of Finnslough and what it means has been championed by a new generation who have taken on the history and legal fees in an effort to preserve a dying culture out of preference for this way of life. The way things are set up is antithetical geographically and therefore socially to a modern suburban model. Because of the fragile nature of the structures and the ecology within which it is a part of, interaction, exchange of information and an awareness and understanding of one another is key to defining the nuanced nature of value within this definition of community.

Analogous ideas are mirrored and inflated within virtual realities, as demonstrated in the online multi-player game gameneverending (www.ludicorp.com), via the fifth panelist, Caterina Fake. Gaming culture in real time for many is favored for its isolating and all consuming nature. The slip occurs in virtual reality where a gamer is interacting with possibly hundreds of others at a time online, exchanging information, using the parameters of play as a vehicle for both experimentation and creating real social relationships. With gameneverending in particular, the way one survives in the game is to do altruistic things for other players, opening up the objective in the process. Caterina offered her observations of the game's operation during the BETA testing stages and the parallels that exist in real time relations.

Elizabeth Zvonar's ongoing project FREE LUCK shares ideological characteristics of play culture. She traced the development of past FREE LUCK projects, focusing on the FREE LUCK CART project for the discussion. Elizabeth set up a cart in front of public spaces in Vancouver that rely on luck, Bingo Halls and Provincial Social Assistance offices. She offered luck in the form of a talisman in exchange for wishes wished while holding the TIN CAN WISH CAN. She brought FREE LUCK to Ottawa in December 2003 to offer luck up in front of places she felt needed some luck. The National Gallery of Canada, The Parliament Buildings, The US Embassy and Cornelia Oberlander's Peacekeeping Monument, among other sites.

These interventions revise the use of public space, engaging negotiation at a level defined by curiosity and a promising confident expectation. The pattern of approach resembles a monetary transaction but contradicts that expectation with the absence of money replaced by an onus to interact. This is not a difficult leap; however it is mildly absurd and begs to reconsider the rules of engagement.

Capital at its lowest thrives on poverty, addiction and marginalization. The contentious Downtown Eastside of Vancouver boasts a complex and feral free market of all things illicit to mundane in an open observatory that researchers the world over flock to study. A longtime resident and participant in the UBC sponsored Humanities 101 program (www.humanities101.arts.ubc.ca), Lou Parson's spoke about his experiences with the street, who, why and how it operates in Vancouver. The parallels are richly layered and rooted in fundamental survival. The acceptance that illegitimate use of civic space arises from a lack of legitimate use for a space rests responsibility on the shoulders of lackluster governments and the people who elect them.

The motivation for human degradation and addiction is no different from the pillaging of natural resources. Value in this form of Capitalism necessarily functions most effectively when we contribute to a system that privileges capital over respect for moral ethics. The contemporary trend toward transparency of indulgence prefaces apathy and cements a required distance necessary to be absolved of guilt. A Measure of Happiness reintroduced critical concepts using the platform of public gathering to instigate a dialogue while highlighting the necessity of social networks and a re-examination of social history and its ability to repeat itself.