Piero Manzoni, *Base Magica*, 1961.

Exchange Rate: On Obligation and Reciprocity in Some Art of the 1960s and After

MIWON KWON

IN THE FACE of a plethora of visual art experiments of the late 1960s—all tamed by now into discrete categories, such as Conceptual art, Land art, Happenings, Performance, Process art, activist art—the influential art historian and critic Lucy Lippard proposed the overarching concept of "dematerialization" as a means to understand their collective motivation. She predicted in her 1968 essay "The Dematerialization of Art":

> As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.[1]

Listing an eclectic array of what she called "post-aesthetic" works from this period—including Robert Rauschenberg's erasure of a Willem de Kooning drawing, Yves Klein's "empty gallery" show in Paris, On Kawara's daily date paintings, Joseph Kosuth's photostat *Art as Idea as Idea*, Christine Kozlov's open film canister with a reel of transparent film inside, Hans Haacke's condensation and frost sculptures, Robert Smithson's maps and earthworks, Ed Ruscha's books, George Brecht's "events," and Ray Johnson's mailings, among many others—Lippard acknowledged the moment as indicating a major art-historical shift.[2] Away from art as product to art as idea or art as action, she declared.

Reflecting back on this moment in the introduction to the 1997 reissue of her book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, in which a wider range and a longer list of art projects and publications are inventoried, Lippard elaborated further on the dematerialization principle, emphasizing its political significance.[3] Partly quoting herself from 1969, she wrote:

> Anti-establishment fervor in the 1960s focused on the de-mythologization and de-commodification of art, on the need for an independent (or "alternative") art that could not be bought and sold by the greedy sector that owned everything that was exploiting the world and promoting the Vietnam War. "The artists who are trying to do non-object art are introducing a drastic solution to the problems of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art."[4]

Which is to say, dematerialized art, in which the "idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious,"[5] is viewed as a strategic subversion of the commercialization of art and the commodification of the art object. In 1968, Lippard had reasoned that "since dealers cannot sell art-as-idea, economic materialism is denied along with physical materialism."[6]

Such a claim, energizing and generation-defining at the time, seems poignantly utopian now. Clearly, dealers *have* figured out how to sell art-as-idea or art-as-action. The reconstitution of art that seemed dematerialized in the late 1960s via what Lippard called its "epilogue," the residual materials that physically evidence the idea or action in the form of a proposal, instruction, "score," relic, souvenir, or documentation, is a commonplace in today's art market.[7] The very nature of the market economy has also shifted since the late 1960s, and immaterial, invisible aspects, such as services, information, and "experience," are now quantifiable units of measure to gauge economic productivity, growth, and profit.[8] Ideas and actions do not debilitate or escape the market system because they are dematerialized; they drive it precisely because so. Despite these profoundly changed realities, however, which inevitably recast the wisdom of certain political ambitions of 1960s and 1970s art, the presumption that dematerialization = anticommodity still persists in structuring contemporary art discourse. This is not to cast the past investment in dematerialization as a historical mistake on the grounds that it failed to escape the commodity system or did not understand it well enough. Rather, given the conceptual impasse of the equation (denial of physical materialism = denial of economic materialism) and the changed historical circumstances, we might

approach again the art of the 1960s and 1970s with a different set of questions or frames of reference.

In concert with *Work Ethic*'s ambition to present a major reconsideration of the art of this period, specifically through the lens of the changing status of work and artistic labor, this essay sketches some issues pertaining to a related problematic, the nature of exchange. My working hypothesis is as follows. Much of so-called dematerialized art may have complicated the conventional methods of buying and selling art by not conforming to an agreeable and readily exchangeable commodity form. But the radicality, or the intelligence, of such art does not merely lie in its non-object status; the negation of the object form is not an automatic challenge to the abstraction of commodity exchange. I would argue that of greater significance is the fact that many works from the 1960s and 1970s and later—art as idea, art as action, Conceptual art, Performance art, Happenings, and so on—attempt to install alternative models of exchange that counter, complicate, or parody the dominant market- and profit-based system of exchange.[9] In fact, many of them engage the logic of the gift economy as one such alternative. By this I mean that the artwork in such cases functions 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. Furthermore, in addition to reorganizing the position and relationship of the art maker and art audience in a general sense, such artwork, through the process of exchange, tests each person's sense of honor and dishonor, shame, power, risk, fear, status, humiliation, and prestige.

*** ***

> *[The] giver's undeclared calculation has to reckon with the receiver's undeclared calculation, and hence satisfy his expectations without appearing to know what they are.* —Pierre Bourdieu

Let's consider the following works drawn from the *Work Ethic* exhibition. On a typewritten piece of paper, Alison Knowles humbly suggests (or sternly demands, depending on how one interprets the statement), "Make a salad." Piero Manzoni builds a pedestal for view-

Valie Export (with Peter Weibel), *Tapp und Tastkino (Touch Cinema)*, 1968. Photograph: Werner Schulz.

ers to stand on so that they can be transformed into works of art. Yoko Ono instructs her audience members to cut off pieces of her dress and take the scraps away with them. Eleanor Antin notarizes her plan to leave a group meeting immediately if she fails to address certain persons from behind them. Valie Export bares her breasts inside a modified cardboard box, to be touched, though not seen, by random people on the street. Edward Kienholz proposes in writing several different versions of a "concept tableau" to suit a potential patron's preference and/or pocketbook. Lee Lozano demands of herself that she not participate in any art-related events or activities starting February 8, 1969.

Claiming that artworks such as these engage the logic of the gift is not to say that they are literally gifts. Few of them, indeed, appear to satisfy the conventional definition of the gift as a voluntary act of

generosity, even a sacrificial offering, that harbors no expectation of a return in kind or of personal gain on the part of the giver (i.e., Export, Ono).[10] But by invoking the gift economy here, I mean to call attention to the more complex ways in which artworks such as those mentioned above *operate like gifts*, presenting explicit and implicit demands, challenges, invitations, and dares that create an obligation to reciprocate with a suitable response. As we know from the work of Marcel Mauss, the French sociologist and author of the hugely influential *Essai sur le don* (*The Gift* [1924]) as well as subsequent theories of the gift, there is no such thing as a free gift or entirely disinterested, uncalculated giving.[11] And, as recently summarized by anthropologist Maurice Godelier, Mauss teaches us that "the interest of giving-while-appearing-disinterested resides ultimately in one fundamental characteristic of gift-giving, which is that . . . what *creates the obligation to give is that giving creates obligations.*"[12] So the question remains: What kind of obligation do artworks of this kind impose upon their audience? That is, how are we to "reciprocate"?

Sometimes, as in the examples of Antin, Lozano, and Kienholz, the artist gives instructions that obligate him- or herself to fulfill his or her own challenge. These cases present a self-enclosed circuit of obligation and reciprocity that will be beyond the scope of this essay. In other instances, as in the cases of Manzoni, Knowles, Ono, and Export, the viewer/audience is put in an "indebted" position, obligated to respond to the artistic instruction or offering via the avenues prescribed by the works themselves—i.e., engagement, interaction, participation. This kind of situation, in which the audience is given the opportunity to "complete" the work, is usually described as resulting from an artist's self-abnegation. The artist ostensibly gives up to the audience, as if it were a gift, his or her authority of creative authorship. This displacement, often loosely associated with Roland Barthes's well-known notion of the "death of the author" (and the "birth of the reader"), is commonly viewed as a critique of exclusive and elitist cultural values upheld by the art market and mainstream art institutions. Moreover, to borrow Lippard's words, it is generally considered an "attack on the notion of originality, . . . an attack on the genius theory, the hitherto most cherished aspect of patriarchal, ruling-class art."[13] But if we accept this act of relinquishing the privileged right or ownership of artistic author-

Yoko Ono, *Painting to Hammer a Nail,* 1966.

ship as indeed an act of critical generosity—even as an effort to democratize art, as some have argued[13]—then we must also attend to the full extent of the paradoxical condition that this act actualizes.

Consider the following passage from Godelier's *Enigma of the Gift,* substituting the author's use of the terms "giver," "receiver," and "gift" with "artist," "audience," and "artwork," respectively.

> The act of giving seems to create simultaneously a twofold relationship between the giver and receiver. A relationship of *solidarity* because the giver shares what he has, or what he is, with the receiver; and a relationship of *superiority* because the one who receives the gift and accepts it places himself in the debt of the one who has given it, thereby becoming indebted to the giver and to a certain extent becoming his "dependant" at least for as long as he has not "given back" what he was given.
>
> Giving thus seems to establish a difference and an inequality of status between donor and recipient, which can in certain instances become a hierarchy: if this hierarchy already exists, then the gift expresses and legitimizes it. Two opposite movements are thus contained in a single act. The gift decreases the distance between the protagonists because it is a form of sharing, and it increases the social distance between them because one is now indebted to the other.[15]

Following this insight, we can confirm that the gift of sharing the authorial role of the artist, rendering the audience into active participants or partners to complete the work, registers the artist's desire for solidarity or equality with his or her audience while at the same time reaffirming the artist's superior position.

The work of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark from the 1960s and 1970s is a paradigmatic example of this power dynamic. Like many artists of her generation, she rejected ego-centered art production. Her work—from simple objects and contraptions to more elaborate group events—elicited direct physical participation from audiences usually more accustomed to a passive, distanced, and exclusively visual appreciation of art. But if Clark was "content to simply propose to others to be themselves," as critic Guy Brett claims, then it is equally true that she imagined her audience as unable, lacking the means and knowledge, to "be themselves" without her particular artistic intervention.[16] Clark presupposed that people generally suffer from fragmentation of body and mind, from alienation from self and others, and that basic multisensory engagement with objects and/or other people would stimulate repressed aspects of their perceptual capacities, encouraging them to regain a holistic and renewed sense of self. It is no coincidence that Clark eventually came

to think of her audience as "patients" and her art as a form of unorthodox psychotherapy—that is, as a form of healing. In her case, the sharing of creative or authorial power between artist and audience constitutes nothing short of a gift of life, the reinstatement of a full subjecthood.

While Clark's practice represents an extreme case of art as gift and artist as gift giver, more recent works mobilize, if less explicitly, a similar economy of exchange in which the artwork functions as an invitation or a challenge provoking the audience into active participatory roles. Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures*, for instance, provide instructions that allow potentially anyone to become a work of art, however briefly. A seemingly lighthearted and simple project that belies a complex engagement with distinctions of media and the function of time in the constitution of a work of art, *One Minute Sculptures* are initiated in the form of drawings and written propositions that diagram variously humorous, provocative, and nonsensical actions.[17] Wurm suggests holding one's breath while thinking of Spinoza, balancing a roll of toilet paper on one's back while forwardly bent over, propping up a line of balls and buckets against a wall with one's head, lying on tennis balls without letting one's body touch the floor, putting on a pair of pants over one's head as if it were a sweater. Although *One Minute Sculptures* are usually exhibited as already accomplished deeds—as already reciprocated "gifts"—through photographic and video documentation, any future viewer's attempt to fulfill Wurm's challenging propositions (with built-in failure) will result, in principle, in another unique "sculpture." Thus, the work sustains itself as an open-ended invitation that has the potential to obligate respondents continuously, converting artistic reception into artistic production anytime and anywhere.

Gabriel Orozco's *Mesa de ping-pong con estanque* (*Ping Pond Table* [1998]) likewise offers its audience an opportunity to "complete" or become a work of art. In Orozco's case, the "gift" is an unexpected group interaction based in play. His eccentrically reconfigured Ping-Pong table, now extended and four-sided with a square, lily-filled "pond" in the middle, recalls Arte Povera's prevalent use of natural elements as sculptural material on the one hand and Claude Monet's famous Impressionist lilies on the other. More important than such art-historical references, however, is how the work brings into the

Erwin Wurm, *One Minute Sculpture,* 1997. Installation at Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna.

museum space, which traditionally demands quiet secular reverence, a "low" recreational sport that can transform it into a spirited site of social exchange. Whether seen as a critique of institutional conventions, exposing what is normally repressed by them, or as a capitulation to the rising tendency toward entertainment-oriented programming among museums, *Ping Pond Table* leaves up to its audience the rules of engagement and potential competition. The work's status as a sculptural object or a performance prop also depends entirely on the reaction of the people gathered around the work at

any one time, on their inclination or aversion toward interacting with others, possibly strangers. Orozco's distorted game of Ping-Pong, in other words, offers its audience the capacity to determine its meaning and purpose.

This kind of authorial generosity, however, also maintains a distance between artist and audience, securing the "superior" position of the former, as noted earlier. The hierarchy of relations between the artist as creative thinker/maker and viewer as disciplined consumer/receiver is not ultimately negated or refuted, as is often claimed. It is rather expressed and legitimized in the very gesture of giving away the ownership of the creative act.[18] Giving things away is tied up with ego-consolidation; abdication of one's authority asserts one's superiority. This is a point that many critics (especially those who champion "interactive" and participatory art generally, such as museum educators, public art sponsors, and Internet enthusiasts) continue to miss.

But what of the gift that is refused or otherwise unacknowledged? A dinner party to which no one comes? An instruction that goes ignored? As much as the accepting of a gift puts one in debt, in an inferior position to the giver until the debt is cleared through reciprocation, the refusal of a gift functions as a rejection of both the giver's superiority and his or her invitation to solidarity. Consequently, there is always the risk of personal humiliation and of a breach in social relations involved with gift giving. The dreadfulness of this breach was brought home to me during a visit to the 1995 Guggenheim Museum retrospective of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, an artist noted for translating so many lessons from the art of the 1960s and 1970s.[19] Of great popularity in the exhibition were his well-known paper stacks and candy piles, which invite viewers not only to touch the art but also to take pieces of it with them. The large number of museum visitors cheerfully collecting sheets of paper and grabbing handfuls of candy as they moved through the spiraling exhibition seemed to bear out the observation of many critics and curators that these works are acts of unusual generosity. And the thought of Gonzalez-Torres's work being distributed around the world through the movement of his audience (rather than through the standard art market as a precious and expensive commodity)

heartened me, as I considered how modestly yet effectively art can enter the spaces of people's daily lives.

Even before leaving the museum, however, I was shocked by the sight of overstuffed garbage cans in the lobby, jammed with rolled and scrunched sheets of paper from Gonzalez-Torres's stacks. Outside the museum, too, Fifth Avenue waste bins were filled to capacity with what were, only a few yards away inside the museum, "works of art." Granted, one can argue that the brilliance of Gonzalez-Torres's work lies in making evident precisely this kind of categorical slippage. But the ungracious scene of the audience's hoarding and then trashing Gonzalez-Torres's "gift" threw into harsh relief another fact: the thinness of the line separating honor and humiliation and the tenuousness of the very notion of the gift. The "repudiation of artistic control" in Gonzalez-Torres's giveaway works, as in other works of the past and present that offer authorship privileges to the audience (many included in *Work Ethic*), may continue to bring high esteem to the artist as a generous gift giver. But this esteem is predicated on the belief that anonymous recipients for whom the work is intended accept the "gift of the artist" unconditionally and properly.

If we take stock of the gift's rejection, however—or, in Gonzalez-Torres's case, its apparent acceptance at the outset followed by its quick disposal as trash—the artist's standing seems to diminish dramatically and become vulnerable, as though he or she were a victim of a brutally hurtful personal rebuff. (How sad and truly exposed would Yoko Ono have appeared if her instruction to her audience in *Cut Piece* had been met with no response—utter silence, inaction, and indifference?) The throwing away of the gift/work may be an unpremeditated or uneducated act, thus of little consequence to the meaning of the work, but that would render the taking of the gift/work all the more significant as potentially an act of thoughtlessness instead of interaction. The trashing of the gift is akin to the rejection of the solidarity that the artist/artwork proposes. Through the repudiation of a work's (and by extension, an institution's) generosity, the audience/receiver can assert its "superior" position.[20]

.....

As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has noted, an "inaugural act that institutes communication (by addressing words, offering a gift,

(this page and opposite) Reception for Ross Bleckner and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, March 2, 1995, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

issuing an invitation or a challenge, etc.)," like so many of the dematerialized artworks under consideration here that propose an action or expect a response, "always entails a kind of intrusion or even a calling into question . . . [that] inevitably contains the potentiality of a bond, an obligation."[21] This possibility of a bond, an ongoing relationship of mutuality and exchange—between artist and audience, between persons—is at the heart of the anticommodification efforts. For if the economy and moral code of commodity exchange is based on alienable objects and alienated subjects, whose ties of dependence to one another are cancelled at the moment of exchange, the economy and moral code of gift giving asserts the impossibility of that cancellation. Just as the acceptance of a gift immediately puts one in debt to the gift giver, a debt that must be repaid in an appropriate and timely manner following certain cultural rules in order that one not lose face or insult the gift giver, these artworks place upon their addressees—upon us, even many years hence—a burden to answer their call for solidarity and communality.

But such art, as I have tried to show, also hazards the possibility of legitimizing and reinforcing existing hierarchical power relations (the giver/artist maintains superiority). It can also reveal the impotence of generosity, especially when the gift is rejected, when there is no counter-gift or riposte, when the call goes unheeded. Again, Bourdieu: "It is true that . . . one can always choose not to reply to the interpellation, invitation, or challenge or not to reply immediately, to defer and to leave the other party in expectation. But non-response is still a response, and it is not so easy to shrug off the initial calling into question, which acts as a kind of *fatum*, a destiny."[22] This resonates with the particular temporality of the artworks I have considered in this essay. Like the temporality of the gift, each work anticipates a social process and a future. The articulation of as-yet-unrealized possibilities of social interaction and relations *is* the work. This is why when these works are exhibited only through object residues, they seem so inadequate: the immediacy of "presence" is missing, of course, but in addition, the *promise* of potential

actions and relations—of mutual dependence, reciprocity, and solidarity—is denied.

A final thought. On certain occasions, when one receives or accepts a gift, the obligation is not to reciprocate with a comparable counter-gift but to hold on to the original one. Continuity of social relations is secured not always in the moment of taking or receiving a gift but in keeping it over time.[23] As implied in the Gonzalez-Torres incident, it takes a certain commitment and vigilance to abide by the obligation to *keep* a gift, to withhold it from dominant modes of circulation and exchange, to protect it from becoming alienable. The weight of *this* obligation seems more ambiguous and heavier than the obligation to reciprocate. For once this kind of gift is accepted, we are continually beholden to imagine different destinies for art than what they have been.

1. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Artforum International* 6, no. 6 (1968): 31–36; reprinted in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 255.

2. Lippard heeds Joseph Schillinger's evolutionary mapping of artistic development in his 1948 book *The Mathematical Basis of the Arts*, which posits the eventual "disintegration of art" and the "abstraction and liberation of the idea." While she argues for this moment as almost a historical inevitability, Lippard claims Dada and Surrealism as precedents for the "post-aesthetic" dematerialization of art that she sees around her. Marcel Duchamp is championed above all as the forerunner, the model of the artist as thinker rather than the artist as maker ("Dematerialization of Art," 258, 268–270).

3. Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," introduction to *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ed. Lucy Lippard (New York: Praeger, 1973; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), vii–xxii.

4. Ibid., xiv. The quotation from 1969 concludes, "The people who buy a work of art they can't hang up or have in their garden are less interested in possession. They are patrons rather than collectors."

5. Ibid., xiii.

6. Lippard, "Dematerialization of Art," 270.

7. See, for instance, Paul Schimmel, *Out of Actions*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000).

8. See my *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002).

9. Random examples include Edward Kienholz's watercolors that depict the object or monetary sum to be bartered with the painting; David Hammons's Dada-esque sale of different sizes of snowballs on a New York City street corner; and Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos's distribution of an NEA grant to undocumented workers in the San Diego/Tijuana area as a tax "rebate."

10. For a reading of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* in relation to the gift, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," *Oxford Art Journal* 26 (Spring 2003): 99–123.

11. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Hall (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990). Recent publications on the gift include Alan D. Schrift, ed., *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

12. Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, 15; emphasis in the original.

13. Lippard, "Escape Attempts," xv.

14. See, for instance, the rhetoric around "new genre public art" described in Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

15. Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, 12.

16. As noted by critic Guy Brett, Clark's eccentric goggles, gloves, bags, masks, suits, restraints, elastic netting, and "biological architecture," all emphasizing tactility and bodily engagement over opticality, allowed those "who had been art's spectator . . . [to] rediscover his or her own poetics (expressivity, creativity) in themselves and come to be the subject of their own experience." See Guy Brett, "Lygia Clark: Six Cells," in *Lygia Clark*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1998), 18.

17. For an insightful analysis of the various manifestations of Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* (i.e., drawing, performance, photography, video), see Michael Newman, "Photography and Video as Sculpture in the Work of Erwin Wurm," in *Erwin Wurm*, exh. cat. (London: The Photographer's Gallery, 2000), 4–8.

18. In Lygia Clark's case, her generosity secures the "superior" position of the artist as the healer/therapist in relation to a pathologized audience's state of debilitation and lack. Interestingly, it seems that Clark was quite aware of the paradoxical nature of this kind of generosity: "my self-centeredness which being so great made me give everything to the other, even the authorship of the work" (Brett, "Lygia Clark: Six Cells," 18).

19. See Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995).

20. Felix Gonzalez-Torres was contrarily very specific about the responsibilities and "rights" of those who would come to own the paper stack and candy pile pieces as "works," be they individual collectors or museums. He made a distinction between ownership and participation. On the complexities of Gonzalez-Torres's certificates of authenticity and the issues that they raise for authorship, ownership, and the question of what constitutes a "work," see David Deitcher, "Contradictions and Containment," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1997), 104–9.

21. Pierre Bourdieu, "Marginalia: Some Additional Notes on the Gift," in *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Schrift, 238.

22. Ibid.

23. See Annett Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).