

“Cacht” Project Report

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In addition to documenting the work, “Cacht,” this report will provide a guide for anyone who wishes to repeat the project.

Step 1. Goal Definition.

The goal of “Cacht” is to examine the concept of generosity. In order to do this we recommend defining three criteria: 1. the budget, 2. the community and 3. the object. The definition of these criteria is not to be done individually, but in a group of at least 3 people and no more than 6.

The aspects of generosity “Cacht” seeks to address are: a. its definition, b. its enactment and c. its beneficiaries. During our group’s initial discussions we found that what we assumed was a fairly cut-and-dry definition could, in fact, be looked at in a way that lent ambiguity to the concept. Meaning, initially we assumed the act of giving was generous, and the act of keeping was selfish. However, the more variables we introduced into both the initiation and consequence of giving and keeping, the more we were able to define actions that were simultaneously selfish and generous. This is the first criteria of “Cacht”: to define an act of apparent generosity which has, instead, either contradictory or competing implications.

The budget is a key component in “Cacht.” It will determine the size of a community your group can address, as well as the nature and quality of the objects you produce. We recommend that the smaller the budget, the more finite a community you choose to engage. With a budget of \$150, some communities we considered addressing were a local business, a local shelter and a local gallery. Likewise, because “Cacht” can frequently employ the direct distribution of money, we recommend that whatever object is made be significantly inexpensive; relying especially on free resources available to your group. As students in a major university we were fortunate enough to have a wide and sophisticated array of technical resources at our disposal.

The community to be addressed should, in some way, be able to benefit from your group’s involvement in their daily operation. That is to say, whatever you propose should not inhibit or impinge in any way on the day-to-day activities they depend on to survive. Whether it is money they receive, added interest in their operations, publicity or some other benefit, the benefit of your project to their operations should be clearly identified. This is crucial in your group’s next step: contacting the community. We recommend contacting the person in charge. It is helpful if some member of your group has a personal or institutional contact with the community. Our group was, again, fortunate enough to have two major connections to our community, the List Gallery at MIT. Firstly, we were all members of the MIT community. Secondly, our work was affiliated with a course taught by an artist well-known to the gallery’s staff. In return, we were extraordinarily fortunate



nate to not only have the gallery welcome the opportunity to work with us, but to take an active role in helping us realize the project. This kind of cooperation is ideal, for it draws on a wider pool of resources, as well as resources inherent or indicative to the community the project seeks to address.

Finally, the object is of special importance. To this end there is really very little we can recommend for the realization of the object. This has to rely primarily on the imagination, skills and resources available to your group. What is important to note is that the object can be anything, can look like anything and can feel like anything. Again, we recommend keeping costs low. The primary criterion for the object is that it will be mass-produced. This is not to say that each object is identical. This simply means that each object can be recognized as belonging to a larger family of objects. Some things to consider generally are: the associative meaning of the object, the aesthetic qualities of the object and the inherent value of the object. The associative meaning of the object is determined primarily by what it looks or feels like. I.e. when someone looks at this thing will they think of another thing and make, possibly, some narrative connection between the use of the object and this other thing? The aesthetic qualities simply mean the look and feel of the object in and of itself. Does the object blend with its environment? Does it stand in contrast to its environment? Does it feel comfortable or cause discomfort. These are qualities related directly to sensation and perception, regardless of their associative meaning. Finally, the inherent value can be determined by two factors. The monetary value as determined not only by its cost, but also by whatever values attributed to it by any “market” relative to certain individuals or communities.

Step 2. Our Project.

Our community was the List Gallery at MIT. Our budget was \$150 plus whatever money we contributed individually. The object we fabricated was a translucent silicon sheath, sized to fit into the palm of your hand. Within this sheath was a folded bill, either \$1, \$5 or \$10. Each sheath was fabricated from a plaster mold which was made on a 3-D printing machine. Our object was presented to each subject – a gallery visitor — with no instructions other than for them to do as they wished with it.

We fabricated about 100 objects. The objects were set up at the reception desk of the List with instructions for visitors to take one. From that point visitors were free to do with them as they pleased. Our predicted routine for these objects was that people would hold them as they passed through the gallery. They would investigate them and find the money inside. On exiting the gallery there was a donation box. The slot in the donation box clearly mirrored the shape of the silicon sheath. Our expectation was that visitors would then make a decision whether to keep the money or donate it to the gallery. As well, it was expected they would return the sheath into the slot.

The key decisions we made during this process were: a. the



nature of the exchange and b. the characteristics of the object. The exchange was established initially around the action of small donations given on the exit of a gallery. Several options were run through, including the destruction of the object and the fabrication of the object by an artist. However, through a process of editing we decided that only one value characteristic was necessary. This value would be the literal value of whatever bill was inside the object. Having reduced the value to such a singular point, the nature of the exchange lay in what directions were assigned to it. The decision to assign minimum directions was intended to engage the subject in a deductive process, wherein over the course of their stay in the gallery some purpose or fate for the sheath would be slowly determined by them. Constructing a custom-made donation slot clearly indicating a suggested fate for the object was intended to speak to the visitor not in an instructive voice, but through the power of suggestion. Thus, the “desire” of the gallery was not explicitly stated and was left, instead, to some internal dialogue on the part of the visitor to sort out.

Therefore, there were two primary decisions a visitor could make. They could either donate the money or keep it. They could interpret the money as a gift, or act of generosity, on the part of the gallery. Or they could interpret it as an opportunity for them to make a gift to the gallery instead. The decision to keep the money would at first seem to be a clear indication of selfishness. And to a large degree it may have been. But, beyond this initial reading, the decision to keep or give the bill can be interpreted as a larger suggestion as to the value of the gallery experience to the visitor. There are probably a number of complex motivations for giving or keeping the money. From being well-enough off that it may be of little value, to being dissatisfied with the work exhibited, to interpreting it as a sign of appreciation on the gallery’s part. Whichever the reasoning, it indicates a position or understanding of the gallery visit on the part of the viewing public as either a valuable one, or one necessitating a greater degree of importance to supersede one’s own monetary desires.

To interpret it as a gift on the gallery’s part may be read as an indication of the visitor’s own estimation of their value in the gallery exhibition process. Whatever the case, the outcome of the experiment may not indicate an overall estimation or conclusion on the part of the limited community touched by it. Instead, it seems that its greatest value may lie in its nature as a vehicle through which to observe the actions and behaviors of individuals in response to it.

Step 3. Outcome and Anecdotes.

It seems there were several successes of the implementation of “Cacht.” However, they were not what we initially expected. As I stated before, it seems that the process of the implementation and its use was the most successful. However, the notion of reciprocal generosity was neither clearly communicated nor clearly understood.

The success of “Cacht”’s process can be measured on many levels. The generosity of the project group and community partnership



was particularly productive. The generosity of the attendant and visitor relationship, likewise, was marked with its own kind of generosity. Finally, and perhaps the greatest success in terms of a complex sense of generosity, was a frequent sense of suspicion that surrounded the act of generosity itself.

The gallery itself provided materials and man-hours to the production and operation of the project. They constructed a deposit box and slot for the objects and their contents. As well, they actively shuffled and reshuffled the objects in a kind of shell-game to keep the most valuable bills rotating their position. The objects were a hit with visitors and employees alike. Several employees have taken the objects home with them. The front-desk attendants did an exceptional job of assuming the role of impassive distributors of the objects, responding to inquiries using strictly scripted responses. Overall, there was an intense interest and pleasure taken on the part of the community in playing a role in this project.

One benefit of the project we did not expect was the sense of engagement it provided between the attendants and visitors. Each of the attendants we spoke with reported great satisfaction over having the opportunity to react to and speak with gallery visitors. They seemed as interested in the characteristics and personalities of the visitors as the visitors were in the art-work. This is a particularly interesting aspect of the project and one with promising potential as a topic of further investigation.

It seems that an object in our culture plays a profound role in connecting individuals to each other. Typically in the culture around MIT and Cambridge-Boston individuals assume a public anonymity. Whether there is a desire for interaction with others or not, there must normally be a “reason” or objective for one person to approach and interact with another. Objects, like cigarettes, are usually an effective vehicle for this. What is interesting about an object like that of “Cacht” is that it has no apparent reason. There is a desire for communication on the part of its collectors, but there is, really, no need for communication. An object like that of “Cacht” produces a *desire* for interaction rather than filling an apparent need for communication. This is a significant role for an artwork in culture: to exist for the sake of no particular need, except to arouse the emotions of curiosity or desire itself. It is particularly the mystery of the object and event — the very absence of a stated purpose — that provides a key function or role for the object.

A fallout from this, related perhaps to the norm of public anonymity, is the sense of suspicion aroused by the distribution of the object. The act of unprompted generosity for its own sake is anathema to the codes of public interaction. Several visitors asked if they were being filmed. Some did not believe the attendants when they were told they weren't. In any case, the act of giving seemed to prompt a sense among the people that by accepting the object they were going to be observed. The act of giving seemed to provoke a sense of vulnerability among many visitors. Certainly the context of the gift — in a contemporary art-gallery where behavior is frequently a study of work – con-



tributed to this suspicion. But, I would guess that such suspicion would be prompted in many other contexts. It may be easier to satisfy, such as the assumption of promotion on the part of a store or institution, but it would still most likely be aroused. Again, this would be a useful focus for future projects, especially future implementations of “Cacht.”

A few notes must be listed as to the physical production or success of the objects and the receptacle. The objects themselves seemed quite successful. People responded positively to the shape, size, texture, consistency and appearance of the objects. Their translucent appearance presumably lent itself to the intuition of a concealed purpose or agenda for their distribution. The success of the objects’ appeal can be measured by the fact that of 100 distributed, only 30 were returned.

Of these 30 only about half contained money. Of the 15 or so with money only one contained a 5 dollar bill. None contained a 10. In speaking with the attendants, one observation attributed to the small monetary return was that visitors seemed unaware of the return box and the profile of the object cut into its top. For some visitors, it seems, the object seemed plainly a gift, nothing else. Of those who did notice the box, it was reported that it only caught their eye due to the fact that people could see other “Cacht” objects already inside it, through the box’s clear front panel. Of those who returned the object without the money it can only be assumed that their time and needs seemed to be more valuable than those of the gallery. That, or they did not make the connection between the money and the act of donation and assumed the money was simply a gift in the name of an experiment. Perhaps they imagined that they were meant to reflect on the activity of being given money and carrying it around inside a gallery space.

All in all, I would recommend repeating “Cacht” in other environments and under different circumstances. Its value as a social experiment seems interesting. However, of most interest is the factor of its arousal of participant’s suspicion. This would be interesting to test in different communities and cultures. It would also be interesting to examine how this sense of suspicion might be heightened or dampened: played with and modulated as an artist might do with a series of lines on a page. This emotion, this arousal, seems to be the most poignant, unique and charged canvas of the piece. It is also the response that provides the piece with the greatest range of ambiguity or ambivalence. It is in this area, this gray zone between generosity and manipulation, that the characteristics and sensibilities, the hues and values, of cultures and communities can most effectively be drawn out and framed; organized into a piece of open communication. This is then a piece with neither a positive nor negative message, but a message drawn instead from the minute dilemmas and decisions of the human consciousness.

