
RED HOOK JOURNAL

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Give & Take

Sarah Demeuse

On e-flux

The story is well known: e-flux, the artist-run announcement service, counts today more than 50,000 subscribers. Its five-letter name has become an everyday noun in the vocabulary of the creative class. Since its launch in 1999, clients have loved the homogeneity and efficiency, and critics have seen a postcritical paradigm shift.



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Given the widespread familiarity with the service and the dead-end nature of the *but-is-it-art* debate, I'd like to scrutinize instead the most recent e-flux enterprise: time/bank, an online bank that runs parallel to the announcement service and issues time-based currency.

Opening an account with time/bank is similar to setting up an e-flux account and simpler than joining Facebook. Your profile is listed in an online directory titled "members/skills" (sorted on a first-name basis). Unlike your regular bank, entry into this connected world is free. Active account holders place ads, offering services valued in time units (say, dog-walking for two hours) or post their needs (a salsa course for four hours).



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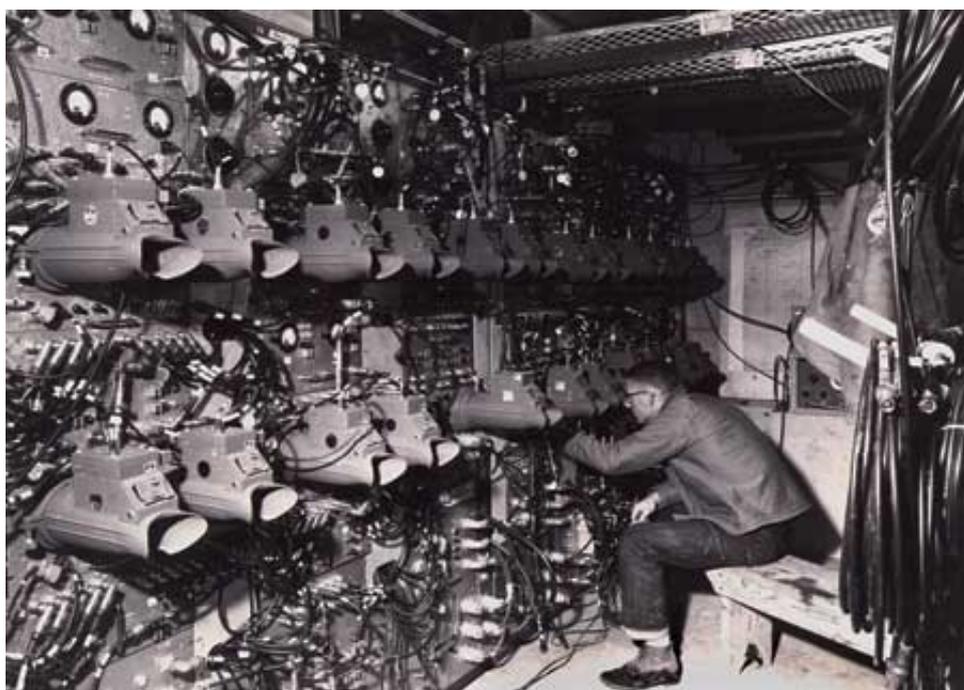
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Time/bank—taking cues from Craigslist and social networks—thrives on peer-to-peer transactions. The dog-walker simply exchanges time with the salsa teacher, their respective online accounts reflecting the balance of this exchange, without the aid of a banker or some other necessary evil.

And here lies the genius of time/bank. In contrast to similar time-based currencies that work mainly as alternatives to an existing market (Ithaca hours or Josiah Warren's nineteenth-century time store in Cincinnati), transactions at this bank promise the establishment of personal connections that may

provide continued benefit, beyond the immediate exchange of goods and services. Culling (mostly) from the pool of e-flux subscribers, time/bank's clientele consists predominantly of members of the precariat, in this case creative workers whose work is largely remunerated in symbolic terms. For them, walking a curator's French bulldogs might mean getting somewhere without slaving away as an anonymous intern. If you get the curator to cook a savory pot-au-feu, you create an opportunity to socialize beyond the hasty conversation by an institutional photocopier. You will, moreover, stick to a code of honor and not overinflate the value of your time. Bad press, after all, is the worst-case scenario in a market built on interpersonal connections.

A point to be criticized? Not really. According to its home page, time/bank acknowledges exchanges that usually go unnoticed—promising a sense of self-worth to the exploited cultural worker. This kind of validation, however, instead of boosting one's self-esteem is more symbolic, and ensures the growth of this market: time/bank understands that a network can expand only if it awards some sense of personal recognition. The least convincing aspect of this initiative relates to its idealistic language. The claims to balance out an unstable market or provide for happiness (as seen on a website affiliated with time/bank) come off as exaggerations, obscuring the fact that this eudaimonic ideal is premised on the exploitative art-world machine that feeds the belief in the necessity of symbolic exchange.



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Such idealism (and somewhat overblown self-historicizing) is best when kept in check. Anarchist or socialist precursors are not about to contradict the financial dependency on the e-flux announcement

service and its two smaller sisters, Art-Agenda and Art&Education. Some may find fault here and victoriously declare, “See! Hypocrites cooperating with the dark side of the force!” I would simply suggest that they have found a way to, if not intervene in, then make a perfectly clear comment on, the nonmonetary marketplace that exists parallel to the art market and sustains it. One can’t exist without the other.

Shortly after the online launch of time/bank, time/store opened its doors just below the e-flux storefront on Essex Street, featuring a haphazard collection—a roomba irobot, fake golden Casios, a can of lentils. One might explain this material component as proof of the real-life potential of this parallel market (one still needs that roll of toilet paper and cannot simply live off copy editing or vegan baking). I saw the shop in the lineage of other artist stores (Oldenburg’s, even e-flux’s own pawnshop)—hence the emphasis on random selection, the artist-designed tokens, the not-always-to-be-trusted opening hours, the talkative shopkeeper.

The shop unexpectedly mirrored a shift in tenor in the New York art field. For comparison’s sake, allow me to cross Delancey Street and go to another basement venue: the Artist Institute. Its inaugural, semester-long program (fall/winter 2010–11) was anchored on Robert Filliou. His and George Brecht’s Smiling Cedilla, a short-lived nonboutique in Villefranche sur Mer—maybe more a pretext to hang out than a gallery—stands undoubtedly as a model for the Institute. The Institute’s insistence on slowness and small scale speaks to the playful resistance to production expressed by Filliou & Co. What is to be appreciated in the AI (counter to what the name suggests) is its levity: its banner doesn’t waft terms such as *discourse*, *critique*, or *research*. The organizers simply invite you to “spend time” with them and the works on display. In comparison to artist-designed conversation platforms, one is not hailed as a provider of a service or as possible coproducer of discourse. What matters, it seems, is experience, rather than service.



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E-flux fans are generally keen to underscore the “discursivity” of the entire apparatus (in fact, the term appears in an effort to legitimize the whole undertaking as an art project: the “object” is not a painting but instead immaterial “discourse”). Time/bank and time/store, while moored in an efficient international productive sphere, initially seemed to escape this yoke. Through browsing and surprise, the store and bank echoed some of that AI postdiscursive wind. There, the participant, though a member of a network of symbolic value, was not asked to maintain that circle of letters/thought/discourse, as in a Habermasian sphere of letters inside a gallery. Anchored in an efficient contemporary sphere of production, they hint at experience sans the pressure to produce a critique. By contrast, the store’s more current incarnations, at Portikus, Stroom Den Haag and even Art Basel, signal the intent to go global. They come with panel discussions and a publication, suggesting that the upstairs organizers do insist on summoning their account holders as willing listeners in, and occasional providers of, critical conversation.

Two more texts on e-flux: Artists Without Art? by Peio Aguirre and The Amateur Collector by Thomas Lawson.

Sarah Demeuse translates, edits, writes (for *Art Papers*, *Paper Monument* and *(H)Art International*), and makes exhibitions (most recently, *pertaining to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous* at iscp). Together with Manuela Moscoso, she founded rivet, a curatorial office that focuses on object-oriented approaches in philosophy and contemporary art.

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