

The Art of Giving

By Nana Asfour

January 27, 2011

On a recent Friday night, lured by the promise of a secret performance, a throng of people piled into a small basement on Eldridge Street. By the time I had arrived, the place was densely packed, and in wading through the crowd I noticed that a foamy, doughy material covered the floor. Behind the front desk, an off-white painting by Lutz Bacher read, in bold black lettering, "Have you heard the one about the cow, the Frenchman, and the bottle of Budweiser?" Nearby, a smiling Justin Bieber stared out from a Chinese-like rectangular banner displayed on a coverless ironing board. It was hot and uncomfortable, and I pitied the blush-cheeked baby who was nestled in a BabyBjörn. The performance still hadn't started, but given that the exhibition on view featured artists Liam Gillick, Matt Keegan, and Amy Granat, I was willing to wait, sure that whatever lay ahead would be worthwhile.

Since it opened last September, the [Artist's Institute](#) has hosted a number of intriguing short exhibitions, lasting only a day or a weekend. Conceived and run by thirty-five-year-old curator Anthony Huberman, whose résumé includes stints as education director of P. S. 1, curator at Palais de Tokyo, and chief curator at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, the space is quickly becoming a standout in the gallery-dense Lower East Side. Funded by Hunter College, it operates year-round as an affiliate to the school's graduate visual-arts program. Huberman, who conducts a weekly seminar at Hunter related to the Institute, says he wanted to "counter the conveyor-belt problem in art where, before we have time to think about what a show means, it gets swallowed by what's next." Each season, the Institute chooses one artist, the "anchor," around which Huberman and his crew of student "researchers" mount exhibitions and events. The entire fall season was dedicated to the relatively unknown Fluxus artist [Robert Filliou](#), a Frenchman and a friend of George Brecht. He served as inspiration, in the loosest sense, to the shows, and his commands to "unlearn," "disinvent," and "misunderstand" were somewhat adopted as the Institute's dogma.

Huberman was born and raised in Switzerland and studied sociology and art history at Georgetown University. Usually demure, he becomes animated when discussing the Institute's origins. In rapid-fire speech, he explains that it's an institute in the two senses of the word: Like an art institute, it operates as a nimble and dynamic public "venue where things happen"; following the more traditional definition, it is a think tank, "where people go to pursue, for an extended period of time, speculative questions." He sees his brainchild as having implications beyond the university's borders: "It's a proposition to the art world for a different type of curatorial idea," he says.

The penultimate show in the five-month-long focus on Filliou was based on a series of gift exchanges between pairs of artists and was initiated by artist and curator Ajay Kurian. "I thought it fit well with Filliou's idea of art as acts of generosity," Huberman said. "Gift exchanges are inherently private so the question is: How do they function in a public setting?" Most of the works were of a sardonic nature: brass doorknobs, two of which now serve as the handles to the Institute's entrance door, by Gillick and Uri Aran; the aforementioned Bieber ironing board, by Keegan and Josh Tonsfeldt, who also provided a map pinpointing the locations on Canal Street where they have met to exchange such items as 3-D Plexiglas versions of themselves. These are now available, amid an array of knickknacks, in a store on Canal. The gifts were on view at the Artist's Institute that night, but, as is the case at openings, it was difficult to see much of the artwork. The best option seemed to be to retreat and wait for the performance to begin. However, a couple hours later, when the crowd inside began to thin, it became clear the show would not go on.

I returned for the closing night on Sunday, when Kurian and Huberman unveiled a film by Granat (who also happens to be Huberman's wife), and the fast-on-the-rise artist Jacob Kassay. In it, Kassay lies on the floor, his legs in the air; with his feet, he supports Granat's body as she "flies" through the air, imitating the kind of games children play with their fathers. The projection superimposes two versions of the performance—in one they are dressed in white; in the other, black—shot on grainy 16mm film. At moments, the combined footage is carefree and methodical at once, and Granat looks as if she's either levitating or swimming.

After a few minutes, Huberman joined me. He explained that Granat and Kassay are longtime friends and wanted to their exchange to be a collaborative gift that neither would possess. As he talked, my eyes drifted over to a mound of bread loaves on a table; their appetizing smell engulfed the space. "These," Huberman said, pointing toward the table, "are made from the dough that everyone was stepping on at the opening on Friday. We baked them in the back." In that moment, I realized that the audience's footsteps had, unbeknownst to us, been used for that night's performance (an exchange between Kurian and Anicka Yi), kneading what turned out to be one hundred pounds of pizza dough. It was exactly the kind of gesture Filliou would have loved.