

# Beautiful Eccentrics

**Pablo Helguera**

**Give It Away**

## **Give It Away**

*Means and ways of  
artistic generosity.*

The philanthropic branch of the art world is all about donor recognition: museums and other arts organizations take pains to name buildings, programs, endowed positions, and any other thing that can possibly be attached to an individual supporter. Development and donor cultivation is one of the most essential jobs in the arts (which is not surprising: any day when you look at jobs in this field, fundraising and

development positions constitute nearly 80% of the available postings). And because financial support is so critical it is not surprising that institutions go out of their way to thank donors for their support.

Among those who are rightfully acknowledged in the non-profit art world are visual artists themselves—those who had successful careers and used their wealth to build

endowed foundations to support the arts. These include names like Frankenthaler, Pollock-Krasner, Mitchell, Rauschenberg, Warhol, and more, collectively constituting by some measures US\$7 billion or more in support<sup>\*1</sup>.

Yet there is a kind of support that is less visible to the general public—a kind of support that is not imprinted on an exhibition wall, catalogue, or website, that tends to be more word of

mouth and sometimes even the stuff of urban legend: it is the critical and expansive philanthropic role that artists play among their peers and in their generosity to the public at large.

I inquired about the subject of artistic generosity among my friends on social media and was flooded with a veritable sea of references that would be impossible to include in this text—close to 200 names

and counting. For that reason we created an open-source Artist Generosity Index<sup>\*2</sup> that can be accessed and added to by anyone, listing both the referenced artists and the name of the nominator. It is my hope that this reference document will be used for future research by someone who might want to further explore the topic of artist generosity.

It is easy to dismiss the art world as a cutthroat capitalist “blood sport” (as I once heard a prominent artist label it), characterized by heartless competition and ambition. And yet, while there is no denying of the influence of money, careerism, and overall capitalist greed in art and in life, whenever one is disillusioned by this aspect of the art world one only needs to look at the dizzying list of examples in the aforementioned index

in order to appreciate the immensely vast landscape of generosity among artists that also *permeates* the system.

While impossible to summarize it all in here, it might be helpful to at least attempt to count the ways in which these different forms of altruism take shape and how they can model best practices for the rest of us. Some of the categories we could identify in this artist-generosity landscape,

aside from artists' foundation endowments, include peer support and network-building, education and mentorship, and platform creation.

The artist who builds networks is crucial for the creation of an art scene. They play the role of aggregator and function as the glue that holds an artist community together. They generally lie at the center of every historical art movement, even if they are not explicitly

acknowledged as a prominent artist. They are convener and catalyst. It could be argued that more than generosity, a network-builder might be motivated by self-interest. But at least in my experience, those individuals who take this role, even when they have high self-regard, would be unfairly characterized as primarily self-interested: their primary drive is rather an outside interest and passion in bringing others together.

I think of Suzanne Lacy (from the US), whose work as activist has blended so seamlessly with her social practice artwork, and who has a unique ability to connect people, and Mónica Mayer, another leading feminist artist (from Mexico), whose artworks have always been about inclusion and generosity, ranging from her publications and alternative space/archive Pinto mi Raya<sup>\*3</sup> to her participatory works.

The artist as educator or mentor constitutes one of the oldest and most natural forms of generosity. Kerry James Marshall takes this role very seriously, often lobbying for museums that show his work to also give room to younger Black artists he supports to exhibit as well. In reflecting on this category, I recognize that I myself have benefitted greatly from the support of established artists who have guided me. I often think of the artist



Arturo Herrera, an infinitely generous, knowledgeable, and indefatigable friend who helped me ease into life as an artist in New York when I first landed here. Also, in my previous life in museum education I encountered a wide array of individuals so devoted to the idea of helping others—be it other artists or anyone else—in such a self-effacing fashion that I have often been struck on how little credit they tend to take for what they do.

And those who create platforms for others—from actual stages from where they can perform like Rita McBride's *Arena*\*<sup>4</sup>, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's monumental participatory works (Rafael is one of the most generous individuals I know), or presently in New York Rashid Johnson's *Red Stage*\*<sup>5</sup>, which also invites other performing artists to present their work. The list includes online platforms of mutual support

created by artists, up to and including every and all artist-run spaces, schools, and cultural centers—initiatives that may be easy to describe on paper but that present colossal challenges in creating, running, and sustaining.

A special mention must be made for artists' support projects made from scratch (i.e., that do not come from personal wealth) and that can take a lifetime to build. Such is the

case of Franklin Furnace<sup>\*6</sup>, created by Martha Wilson: a foundation that has funded and supported the production and preservation of performance art for forty-five years (note that she did not name it the “Martha Wilson Foundation,” something that I am sure would seem abhorrent to Martha Wilson herself). J. Morgan Puett also comes to mind in her role of “ambassador of entanglement” in Mildred’s Lane<sup>\*7</sup>, a prodigious decades-

long “experiment of living” project created with Mark Dion in Narrowsburg, New York that has brought together hundreds of artists through residencies, education programs, collaborative events, dialogues, and social experiences.

In Mexico it is impossible to ignore the example of the recently departed Francisco Toledo, a towering figure and force of nature in Mexican art

who directed the funds from the sales of his works to fund the arts in Oaxaca, creating museums and arts programs, supporting activist causes, and funding huge and costly restoration projects of the city’s historical buildings.

And there are those whose practice of generosity is simply hard to categorize. Take Sol LeWitt: he was famous for exchanging artworks with lesser known (or

practically unknown) artists, often giving them pieces that were worth ten times what he was receiving. He purchased artworks to support his artist friends, and he even paid a hospital bill for one of them. (I particularly love the anecdote that even when he was already selling his work for large sums of money he despised ostentation to the point that he did not even own a suit jacket, and he was forced to go to a store to buy

one in order to attend his own MoMA retrospective). His case makes me wonder whether generosity of this kind can truly be learned, for the brand of spontaneous altruism practiced by artists like LeWitt would seem impossible to replicate had it not come from the deepest and most sincere parts of someone's character.

The subject of generosity was deeply engrained within the fabric of the socially engaged art moment of the mid-2000s, even before the term “social practice” was in widespread usage. In other places I have argued that the socially engaged art moment was a response to a collective sense of alienation that was the result of various factors such as the rapid rise and dominance of the web in our collective lives, the post 9/11 world, and the

way in which the globalized art world had seemingly only used the new connectivity we were enjoying in order to strengthen the international art market under the pretense of achieving a greater understanding of cultural difference. In any case, the possibility of making a kind of art that was not sellable and a focus on communication and social experience as opposed to the mere acquisition of objects was important to many of us.

In this regard, when I think of the idea of generosity, I am often reminded of my first encounter with the late Ted Purves, in 2005. A living embodiment of artistic generosity himself, Ted and his partner and collaborator Susanne Cockrell were in the process of running Temescal Amity Works, created for the Temescal neighborhood of Oakland in California. They formed the project as a “social sculpture that also drew upon

historical models of mutual-aid societies, barn-raising, DIY collectives and urban communism.” Through a hand-built, steel pushcart they would collect surplus fruits and vegetables from neighborhood yards that they would give away fresh or in the form of marmalades.

In a book that he and Shane Aslan Selzer co-edited titled *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent*

*Art*, Ted included a key essay of his entitled “Blows Against the Empire” that articulates his position of gift-giving as a radical and transformative act:

“The Situationist strategy of *detournement* overlaid the giving of the unexpected and unsanctioned gifts creates a double transgression that rips through the fabric of what we have accepted to be a given, a tyrannical and pervasive market of the senses that gives nothing without taking something in return. A gift offered in the midst of the transgressive act not only destroys, it also creates. What it creates is the existence of

something altogether different: a community and a bond that is not the bond of bondsman to master or of addict to dealer, but of the giver to the receiver, who then becomes kin and neighbor.”

Generosity is thus a commonplace principle in the social practice sphere. But even within this context if there is an artist who I most admire in the area of creating systems of support for others,

(and someone who was repeatedly mentioned in the aforementioned Artist Generosity Index) that is Caroline Woolard. For her, art making, organizing, and mutual support are inseparable ideas. Here I quote, with her permission, a few sentences from her reflections on generosity, some of which are repurposed from her *Solidarity Art Economy Manifesto*:



“Generosity is how I have survived a world that does not value imagination, maintenance, care, or the earth. [...] Through study, you become aware that life is sustained by gift giving, by mutual aid, by lending, and by informal exchanges. [...] What if the work that sustains life can be valued, connected, and strengthened? You think: What if the work that sustains life is the economy we need, the economy of peace, of community, of cooperation?”

“You know, as you know of your own survival, that this work has power.”

“[...] You know that the solidarity economy, with your deep relationships of care, your mutual aid networks, your community currencies, your barter networks, and your community gardens, land trusts, and cooperatives will sustain themselves, as they always have. [...] You are practicing a powerful

economy of care, together. You have all survived, are all working together. This is your internal power that no one can take away from any of you. And you continue to thrive. How do you feel?”

Harrell Fletcher, another artist who has played a significant role in the process of shaping the field of socially engaged art as a practice of giving and inclusion, wrote to me the other day regarding my

recent social media inquiry about generosity. He made the point that “there is a built-in selfishness to the art world but very little support for behaving generously. There is a difference between generosity when the person being generous is well resourced than when they are scraping by too.”

Harrell's interesting comments brought me to reflect on a possible fallacy that we all might buy into: that we can only be generous when we feel or recognize ourselves as successful. Not only might this condition be an unconscious cop-out from responsibility, but it may be a self-imposed bar that might never be met (what if one never feels successful enough or rich enough to help others?). Which also makes me think that probably the

basic principles of generosity may be most familiar to those who know what it's like to be supported, like the working-class person who leaves a generous tip to the waitress, not because they can afford it but because *they have been there*, because they know what it means to depend on that kind of income.

In fact, the most powerful kind of generosity, and one that when I have experienced

it in the past has deeply moved and shaken me to the core, is the one that I have, on a few occasions, unexpectedly received from someone who is less privileged than me. It's the kind of gesture that, aside from the private shame I feel for not being the one giving, points to a much greater and crucial fact: that we all are in need of each other, that wealth, privilege or fame in it of itself does not make us better humans, and most

importantly, it is a reminder that at the end of the day we are nothing other than regular human beings, artists or not, on a search to connect and be recognized by others. And it is also a reminder that, regardless of our station in life, and regardless of our own perception of our achievements, generosity is a way of being that can ground us and give us a sense of purpose, much as art making is able to do.

As the old Shaker song says:

“’Tis the gift to come down  
where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves  
in the place just right,  
’Twill be in the valley of love  
and delight.”

## Footnotes & References

- <sup>\*1</sup> <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ongoing-artist-as-philanthropist-report-tracks-the-rise-of-endowed-foundations-1463578>
- <sup>\*2</sup> [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1O\\_-a7wzgE53TnkWDB2MuYRIXrqhioMFN8zZD8SXA2W0/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1O_-a7wzgE53TnkWDB2MuYRIXrqhioMFN8zZD8SXA2W0/edit#gid=0)
- <sup>\*3</sup> <https://www.pintomiraya.com/>
- <sup>\*4</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/rita-mcbride-arena-1997>
- <sup>\*5</sup> <https://creativetime.org/red-stage-rashid-johnson-about/>
- <sup>\*6</sup> <https://www.franklinfurnace.org/>
- <sup>\*7</sup> <http://www.mildredslane.com/>

## Colophon

Beautiful Eccentrics #24  
Pablo Helguera  
© 2023 Pablo Helguera  
[www.pablohelguera.net](http://www.pablohelguera.net)  
[www.kiosk.art](http://www.kiosk.art)

First edition, 100 copies  
September 2023  
Author: Pablo Helguera  
Proofreader: Jenifer Evans  
Design: Lien Van Leemput  
Printed at Verbaere, Belgium  
Paper: Clairefontaine Trophée, Lessebo Design  
natural, 100gr  
Fonts used: Times New Roman, Messapia Bold  
(by collettivo.it)

Published online on 10.06.2021  
[www.pablohelguera.substack.com/p/give-it-away](http://www.pablohelguera.substack.com/p/give-it-away)

This publication is an artwork published by Pablo Helguera as part of his solo exhibition *Beautiful Eccentrics: Central Casting* at KIOSK, Ghent (16.09 – 19.11.2023), curated by Simon Delobel.



Vlaanderen  
verbeelding werkt