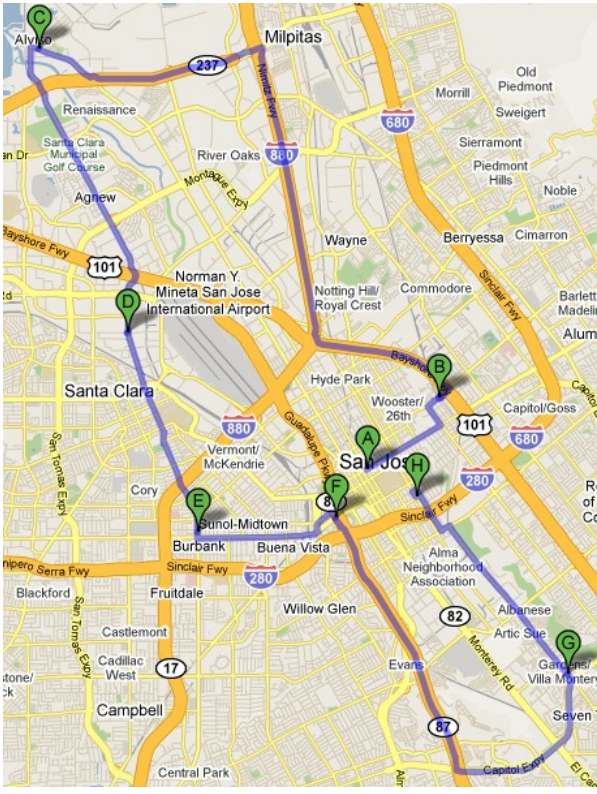


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The gift economy of artistic practice and the social systems created through dialogic artworks.

by Wayne Madsen



Due to the modernist notions of creativity being the fulcrum of artistic practice, the arts were opened up during the 1950's and 1960's to the academic practice of inclusion, rather than a defined vocational architecture for training artists. Artists were subsumed into a four-year program which purported to allow free reign into creativity and bless the world with artistic voices. This model swamped the art market with art practitioners who were attempting to sell the

same thing: creativity/uniqueness. An interesting trade-off for the modernist influx of free-range artists is the potential gift culture within the economic system. "In gift cultures, social status is determined not by what you control but by what you give away. Thus the Kwakiuti chieftain's potlatch party. Thus the multi-millionaire's elaborate and usually public acts of philanthropy, and thus the hacker's long hours of effort to produce high-quality open source code." [2] Throughout the Pacific isles, the Trobriand Islanders shift between islands trading Kula rings to gain higher prestige. Entering into the trade culture requires a period of initial gift seasons taken to win the favor of lower spheres of exchange.

The vitalization of the gift is held as the power of the object. Embodiment of the thing in the public space is the key to these economies, as opposed to exchange value's need to possess the thing. "In many Native American cultures, a gift had no meaning unless it continued to circulate; to hold a gift permanently, or to exchange it for another item of value, was to destroy the gift's function of building ties among members of the community." [3]

What we have been left with is the possibility of using a gift exchange framework to discuss public space and our surrounding environments. "The possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art." [4] We can choose to use free areas of public/private space and create an inter-human exchange, something apart from the traditional exchange culture which surrounds modernist practice of artmaking.

Ghosttown is a Red76 framework which allows the public to participate in open source community gift economies, while presenting a public forum for community issues. Specifically, let us look at the Open Kitchen project of *Ghosttown*. Open Kitchen is an open forum restaurant -- think potluck dinner -- where the food is free as well as offering a location for people to express their memories connected to their food. The menu is determined by the public and the restaurant is a non-stationary space meant to initiate public space discussion. This economy references the artists' deeply rooted connection to this exchange. This project also initiates the public space on a specific level that interests me the most: it is meant as a launching pad for the public to recreate these activities.

Gould loves food, especially food that interfaces itself with the public experience, e.g. taco trucks. These mobile restaurants are able to offer cheap Mexican food because they do not have to pay the lease costs for maintaining a stationary restaurant and are able to access their clients by visiting divergent locations from construction sites to high-tech parking lots. Open kitchen offers a connection between public space and the exchange of ideas about that public space. A mobile food vendor offers a connection, often viewed as a rooting, within that public space offering a history of the area. For example, in a reference to the history of Alviso, there is a taco truck which has become stationary due to a loss of vehicular license and become a geographic point in the map.

This led Sam Gould, Thomas Asmuth and myself to borrow the Situationist concept of the Psychogeography and apply it to a mapping of taco trucks in the San Jose area. We mapped out the best dives and known taco truck sites for noon on an average weekday. This map, linked through the image above, will take you to the hotspots of the public space as interfaced through this community.[5] Any public participant could follow these directions and recreate the taco truck run, allowing the public space to be experienced through this framework.

[1] Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998).

[2] Eric S. Raymond, "The Hacker Milieu as Gift Culture," in *Homesteading the Noosphere*, (1998).

[3] Jon Ippolit, "Whatever Happened to the Gift Economy?" *Leonardo* 34 (2001): 159-160.

[4] Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les Presse Du Reel, 1998).

[5] map last accessed December 11th, 2007 using Google maps.