

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & Its Discontents

Galleries

Supreme Trading: The Free Emporium & Gift Exchange

by **Brent Burket** on December 23, 2009

Meat. One of the first things offered for exchange at the [Free Emporium and Gift Exchange](#) (FE&GE) at Cuchifritos was a slab of meat. Face it. If you choose to move past traditional capitalism, shit is going to get weird. But that's OK. Double A Projects, aka Athena Robles and Anna Stein, are used to it. They opened the wildly successful Free Store in the Financial District back in March, and before they knew it [they were sharing a green room at MSNBC](#) with money vortex Steve Forbes. Can I get an "Anti-matter moment?" Hollaback.

The latest "franchise" of the Global Free Store is a cross between a swap meet and a museum. Whereas everything was free for the taking at the Free Store, at the FE&GE customer's are asked to bring an item to exchange for merchandise. Free trade, baby.

Sharing the space is a look back at the store's aforementioned first incarnation. Being located on the Lower East Side, the push cart that houses all the memories seems especially appropriate. History makes a tidy seam.

Sitting snugly in the corner of the [Essex Street Market](#), the FE&GE continues the tradition of the Global Free Store by fitting into its environment while simultaneously reacting against it. In the midst of a bustling market where customers have been conditioned to exchange money for product, and vendors have relied on turning a profit from it, this little shop demands nothing more of its customers than to show up and bring a gift. A set of mittens can be traded for a bicycle, a jar of jam for a television set. Anything for anything, and one for all.

It would be easy to see FE&GE as some radical call for a revolution against capitalism, but the gestures that make up the experience nullify that sentiment. It's not about capitalism. It's about you. And it's probably about me. The first time I took something from the Free Store, it felt downright *unnatural*, a little itchy. Conversely, when I gave something to the Free Store it was an immediate thrill, but it was almost too much of a thrill. The discomfort on both ends of the equation opened up an inner dialogue about possession and community. I found myself thinking about the narrative of the objects before and after I knew them. I was surprised to find myself thinking that money smooths that over. We pay for the disconnect.

The extremes were muted in my reaction to the process at the FE&GE, but that doesn't mean it was any less fun or challenging. I dropped off some records that they were happy to see. When I went back about five days later I was a little sad to see that nobody had discovered the trading genius in my Jamaican-pressed vinyl, but I enjoyed the possibilities of the shelves just as much as ever, and I had a laugh at my own expense in regards to the vanity I

attached to my *things*. I still haven't traded in my gift certificate. I'm waiting for something as good and weird as a slab of meat. Or maybe just a nice pair of mittens.

The Free Emporium and Gift Exchange is open through January 9, 2010, so there's still time to shop for holiday gifts, or exchange your post-holiday castoffs for something better.