

## Print Article



"Bring Your Own Art": The Rules



Big Game takes the stage for "Bring Your Own Art"



Installing at "Bring Your Own Art"

## X OUT by Ben Davis

So long X, we barely knew ye. The X-Initiative, the pop-up nonprofit that inhabited the former Dia space in Chelsea, has closed after an eventful one-year run. Always meant to be temporary, the "initiative" was sponsored by dealer Elizabeth Dee and masterminded by talented, unflappable Italian curator Cecilia Alemani. It captured the moment with its feisty programming, the sense of huddled-together, semi-utopian escapism in the year of the Great Recession, when artists were caught between looking for alternative models and just hoping that things would turn out alright.

X's line-up of emerging artist shows was better than that at almost any New York museum. X threw its doors open to "No Soul for Sale," packing its floors with sundry nonprofit groups looking for love and attention. X accommodated the difficult demands of institutional critiquer [Hans Haacke](#), who left the windows open in winter, turning the Dia building into a refrigerator. X held roof parties with benches made out of fun noodles.

It has all passed into history now. The experiment came to a conclusion with "Bring Your Own Art" on Feb. 3, 2010, turning the galleries over for twenty-four hours -- 11 am to 11 am -- to anyone who wanted to pop in and show their artwork, whenever and wherever, in the space. It's a gesture with many, many historical precedents, but it did feel right as a good-bye.

The vibe in the first hours of "BYOA" was festive, with artists bustling about the space, fussing with their pieces, schmoozing, laughing, soaking up that final, sweet free alcohol. X's art-book section was having a liquidation sale. The ground floor, with its hideous orange-yellow-and-blue tiled floor, was hosting an open-mic night, with a list on the door for acts to sign up to play (by the end of the evening, one performer had crashed his head through the back of the stage in a fit of amateur punk theatrics). "Rules" for the uncurated show were posted on the door prominently: "Participants need to come with their own tools," "The works will not be insured," and, beyond that, not much else.

Up on the second and third floors (the fourth never came into play), people hung banners, carefully laid out sculptures, filled the walls up with art; it was primarily painting, drawing and sculpture, but there was the odd video work or kinetic piece. Occasionally, a random act of performance art would erupt: a woman made up as a nude blue demon; a man in a Halloween mask. Jerry Saltz was there, giving some critique to game artists, not all of whom looked so happy to receive honest feedback. Anthony Haden-Guest was there, as he is everywhere. [Marina Abramovic](#) was spotted, on hand to support (someone told me) John Bonafede, the performance artist who had set up a drinks table on the second floor. Bonafede stood there serenely in his white cater-waiter outfit, refusing to serve all comers -- a glimpse of hell for a gallery-hopping Tantalus.

Overall, as most commentators have noted, the most striking aspect of the spectacle was its orderliness -- in no way was it the kind of



The state of "Bring Your Own Art,"  
Wednesday night



Art everywhere



Video work by Cecilia Jurado, at "Bring  
Your Own Art"



Performance by artist Jaeun Lee at  
"Bring Your Own Art"

chaotic bacchanal you might expect if someone told you that they were inviting a bunch of artists over to their house to let them do whatever they wanted. In the end, "BYOA" didn't look that much different than any ordinary group show. Though the open-mic performances were raucous, upstairs the galleries weren't even that packed, by people or by art. Most of the wall space was taken up, but it certainly didn't feel overrun. Despite some woolly edges, the gathering felt somehow. . . professional, as if everyone knew the rules of the game in advance, and were just happy to go along with the supportive vibe of it all.

Andrew Goldstein, formerly of the *Art Newspaper* and newly minted as editor of *Artinfo*, told me that he thought the show represented the unconscious of the art world, which is good way to put it -- as long as you don't mean that it was some kind of raw flux of buried creativity, but rather gave expression to some of the art world's more unfortunate repressed truths. The key reference, when assessing the significance of "Bring Your Own Art," was not within the Dia building but all the way across town, at the New Museum. The swirling acrimony that has surrounded that institution's decision to turn itself into a showpiece for the cultural might of Greek supercollector Dakis Joannou is corollary to the chummy democratic exuberance of "BYOA." The Joannou show seems to have served as a kind of McGuffin-like excuse to vent longstanding grievances, the sense of exclusion among the many, many artists who are outside the club looking in.

The artist Peter Reginato wrote to me to say that what makes him furious about the Dakis show is that it represents a "corporate model" for esthetics: "so many of us artists are so fed up with the same artists being shown bought and talked about in the art media by a handful of collectors and museums." This is certainly true; who could deny that a situation in which most of the resources are concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority imposes a certain homogeneity on the art world? On the other hand, what is also true is that the super-rich have the resources to *buy good taste*: they have access to the best advisors, and a shortcut into the studios of the most promising artists. Their support grants room to develop to chosen artists who might otherwise have to divert energy towards more pressing matters of survival, and so, to a certain extent, actually creates quality, confidence, esthetic adventurousness. The contradiction is that ceding room to private collectors represents both a way into superior stuff *and* a disastrous crimping of the imagination. It is, in some contradictory way, both.

If you take the X-Initiative's "Bring Your Own Art" show as the obverse of the New Museum spectacle, it has the same parallax truth to it: On the one hand, it is a liberatory gesture, lifting the velvet rope that keeps out deserving artists who don't have the connections to get shown; on the other, as the actual experience of "Bring Your Own Art" made clear, this does not necessarily mean that you get some flood of talent representing excluded art movements (though there was some promising stuff here; more on that in a sec). In fact, what it meant was a riot of works inspired by the very same styles favored by those hated mega-collectors. Instead of a missive from some kind of rebel alternative art universe, what you got was a festival of career-mindedness. The omnipresent motif at "BYOA" was the business card, with every work carefully displayed alongside a label listing how, exactly, you could get hold of the artists in question. Well, who can blame them? But in concentration, this became the thing that stuck out as the common tic amid the flux of wildly different esthetics, the glue that held the experience together.

The promise of inclusion -- and with the internet, there has never been more promise of inclusion -- set against the reality of scarce actual opportunity sinks into everything, becomes the subconscious



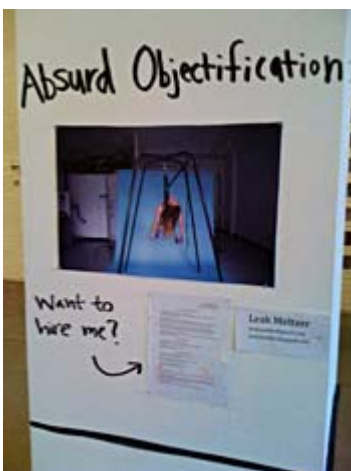
John Bonafede, performing for "Bring Your Own Art"



Work by Chris Bors, in "Bring Your Own Art"



Elizabeth Dee gives a tour of the show



content of a lot of art, a smell that sticks on it the way cigarette smoke sinks into your clothes. Late Wednesday evening, the clamorous performance art troupe **Baby Skin Glove** stormed into the galleries, a tribe of women in tap shoes (recent Pratt grads, I was told), chattering away, groping people, demanding attention. That was the essence of their performance -- a kind of exaggerated acting out of an obsessive, theatrical need for attention. Elizabeth Dee said that at first she had been scared of Baby Skin Glove, because the group had been stalking one of her artists as a performance, sending vaguely unhinged text messages. But then, she said, she changed her mind. "They're actually quite committed to their art," she said. "They're always on." Observing them, I somehow was put in mind of the kinds of tribes kids formed in high school, inventing group identities and adopting modes of dressing, rituals of recognition and so on -- a way to draw strength and support in a hostile atmosphere.

Posted all around the X galleries were flyers: "Lost Artist (blonde hair, blue eyes, 5'7")," they read, "Artist, new to this city of islands, looking for friends, collaborators, lovers, work/money, conversation, adventures and anything anyone has to offer." There was a number, which I dialed. It so happened that the artist, Monica Gunderson, was sitting about ten feet away, on the floor at the base of the wall. As it turned out, her gesture wasn't really a commentary -- the totally appealing and disarmingly sincere Gunderson actually really had just moved to New York from San Francisco, and was simply interested in networking. Or maybe the poster project was a joke that got away from her. At any rate, there was no "Step 2" to this project. I asked if anyone else had called, and she said just one, a hang up. That seemed to me to be a good metaphor for the whole "BYOA" experiment, a gesture towards outreach, but largely a symbolic one.

There was a huge buzz on the evening of the project. Perhaps inevitably, there was also a bit of post-project hangover the next morning. If the high point in terms of energy at "BYOA" was the install, the most poignant moment artistically was almost certainly the take-down, as the show shuttered the next morning at 11 am, and all those artists shuffled in to take away their works. Overnight, some graffiti-ers had wandered in, tagged all the walls, occasionally painting over details of other people's artworks (a violation of the graffiti ethos, as I understand it). A few works had been damaged by the overnight revelry: for instance, artist Mark Billy (an X intern) had shown four "resin and beard hair" casts of his penis on a plinth, one of which had been spirited away. The mood was a little rueful, contemplative, reflective.

Wandering through the space during the take-down, I happened upon the curator Dan Cameron giving his thoughts on the spectacle to his SVA class, a number of whom had apparently participated, and who had that morning asked him to come over for an impromptu crit. Cameron, who had not been there the night before, said that the initiative made him "sad," that he saw it as "capitalizing on the hopes" of artists. One of the artists remarked, "We thought it would just be this fun thing -- and then we got here and everyone had these really professionally made cards, and it became something else." I chatted a bit later with another of Cameron's students (who hadn't shown), who told me that he felt that "X should have committed more to the show," and that it was as if the institution had washed its hands, content to capitalize on the spectacle rather than actually using its commercial connections to help the artists.

I don't really think that this is a fair criticism. The fact that it was a totally open exhibition structure, and that there was no overtly commercial component, was what gave "Bring Your Own Art" its semi-utopian flair and all that separated it, really, from some kind of awful reality show. Of course every artist wants to believe that if there had been more "commitment" on the part of X, then their art

Work by Leah Meltzer, in "Bring Your Own Art"



A member of Baby Skin Glove, at work



"Lost Artist" flier, from Monica Gunderson



The artist Monica Gunderson, just moved to NYC

would have been the thing that was selected, but the fact is that more commitment would have meant more filter, and the whole point of this kind of thing is to see how the art world looks when you take the filter off. The fact that even a gesture of maximum possible curatorial generosity generates such recriminations seems to indicate that the institution can't win; you can't get around the reality of the very unequal world we live in with a clever programming choice.

Of course, if you asked me whom I identify with, the rich patrons over at the New Museum or the hopeful crowds at X, I think the answer to that one is pretty clear. It's not like "BYOA" was just one big waterfall of garbage: there really was interesting stuff there that you probably wouldn't have gotten to see otherwise. I liked the works by Bronx-born artist brothers **Felix & Dexter**, pairs of photos that juxtaposed images of them in low-rent New York supermarkets or neighborhood dives with images of them mugging in front of great works of art. These works were comic, smart, strangely affecting, and nicely summed up a certain authentic insider-outsider art hope. On another wall were posted selections from a "Catalogue of Disposable Images" by **Felisia Tandiono** (a Jakarta-born ICP grad, according to her website), stock images representing different press photo clichés, with wry captions commenting on their content and a number system ranking listing their "disposability." The images were printed on newspaper, intended to fade and be, literally, disposable. Elsewhere, a work by Nima Jahromi caught my eye, appearing to be a stained page torn from a Farsi-language magazine, depicting a woman's dreamy head upturned towards the sky. And then there was a large wooden cabinet thingy, with a mobile lid made out of wood that resembled broken swan's wings (sort of) -- I don't really know what that was doing or who did it, but, maybe for this very reason, it sticks with me.

It's two weeks on since "Bring Your Own Art," and it is probably all but forgotten. These kinds of things are designed to provide a momentary fix of artistic democracy, a hiatus from a career-bound, posturing world -- even if the reality of that world chases participants back inside. But in its fleetingness, it was the perfect epitaph for X-Initiative, which was an experiment born of temporary largesse. X was scrappy but also always very professional, and I think people identified with it most because they identified with a newcomer making things happen in trying circumstances; and also, because it was always meant to be temporary, and so mirrored people's sense that opportunity is fleeting and capricious.

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The final state of "Bring Your Own Art," Thursday morning at 11 am



The deinstallation



Some graffiti writers leave their contribution



Mark Billy works in "Bring Your Own Art" (pre-theft)



Work from Felix & Dexter's "Taking the Initiative" series, at "Bring Your Own Art"



Works from Felisia Tandiono's "Catalogue of Disposable Images," on view at "Bring Your Own Art"



Nima Jahromi's *Conditions to Keep*, on view at "Bring Your Own Art"



Work by unknown artist, at "Bring Your Own Art"



X's empty ground floor gallery, with hole at the back