

## PAWNSHOP; from behind the counter

By Michael Eddy

A neon sign, a crooked fluorescent tube, some glass cases and abusive warnings clumsily taped on the walls; a bag of laundry and books, a case of porno DVDs, a printed out drawing, some balls of tape, a generic painting, and a plant; at first glance PAWNSHOP, a project by Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda, who jointly run e-flux, may appear as a handy curatorial concept, using the thematic of pawnshops to assemble a roomful of curious objects. Behaving in the manner we do in any shop, where it is the goods we recognize and not necessarily the story of how they got there, we could simply admire this collection of objects and their pastiche surroundings. If it is the fact that those behind this project are artists with artistic intentions that brings us to the point of second-guessing what we are seeing, this fact is not the ultimate point behind the project. The same goes for Anton Vidokle's art practice, which challenges us to reconsider what activities can be classed as art, but which doesn't stop at that point—which enables us to proceed beyond to something else.

On one hand, a new and not self-evident type of cooperation with a host space (in this case *the shop*) is established. PAWNSHOP has a few rules and a visual identity that are appropriated by the host, who calls out to numerous artists on behalf of e-flux, inviting them to pawn artworks for a small, standard pawning fee. The host is responsible for the correspondence and the expenses incurred, which in a conventional relationship are understood as the cost of putting on an exhibition. However, PAWNSHOP's existence as a set of rules and an economic structure poses significant challenges for conventional relationships with institutions, as it involves the risk and opportunity of real exchanges of money: the pawned artworks can be sold by the host. The work's prices having been set to an approximation of their market value (many times higher than the pawning fee) then exacerbates the question of the ownership of the pieces; if the work sells, its profits don't go back to the artist but, in typical pawnshop tradition, are kept by e-flux.

A short note on profit: e-flux is both an art practice and a company that generates profits—in exemplary fashion through its e-flux announcement service. Institutions pay e-flux no small price to have their messages sent out to a list of over 50,000 subscribers, who receive a handful of such messages every day. The “complicity” with a capitalistic process, evident in ventures like announcement services and pawnshops, is what Maria Lind points out as being one of the objections coming from “the parts of the art world that think of themselves as ‘critical.’”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a central question we could ask of Vidokle's practice is about what is and isn't “critical”; but actually such questions recede somewhat when placed next to the inquiries that he and his collaborators pursue using the means of this capitalistic process. The act of monetary exchange, in itself a daily and banal act, remains sensitive in many art contexts such as museums, as it sullies their non-profit status and their public mandate. PAWNSHOP is a colorful and attractive project to institutions, except for the inconvenient reality of money that makes up its logic.

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Lind “Dilemmas of Love, Humor and Critique,” in Anton Vidokle *Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat* (Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2009), p. 24.

You may ask why, in any case, artists would agree to such a deal as in PAWNSHOP (it isn't totally satisfying to know that the profits, if there are any after production costs, would go to a charity cause, underscoring the experimental nature of the project). PAWNSHOP is a type of work that in its structure has no explicit boundaries regulating inclusion and exclusion, but its composition can only be made up of the ones who want to take part, and so as well as involving an unconventional relationship with an institution, this work demonstrates a willingness among certain artists to participate. It is not so helpful here to try to examine the motivations for artists who do or do not want to participate or how they negotiate the situation; in any case artists do respond, allowing PAWNSHOP's inventory to fill up with an odd assortment of items, pre-existing or purpose-made. The goodwill this seems to indicate doesn't mean that participants are only drawn from the ranks of "allies" or from one's network. As Julieta Aranda clarified: "Our projects are not concerned with the network model, they are concerned with circulation, which is a different thing. For e-flux video rental, we were not drawing from people we know, we have purposely completely delegated the selection process to people that we do not know. For PAWNSHOP it is the same thing."<sup>2</sup>

Once these relations are clear, the work opens up like a cabinet displaying several forces and assumptions ruling the circulation of art objects. PAWNSHOP, beyond mocking the poor artist stereotype, asks provocatively whether economic systems other than the dominant pair, gallery or auction house, might be possible. e-flux has no illusions that this is the answer to those models of exchange; a pawnshop "is not a nice place or a social service, but is a very predatory economic structure that takes advantage of people in distress. It's a kind of a win-win economic formula for the owners, like a casino that never loses."<sup>3</sup> PAWNSHOP is a simultaneous real gathering based on artist's participation, and the evocation of a "better space" through a negative image. This is not

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<sup>2</sup> In response to my question during the discussion at the opening of PAWNSHOP at *the shop* on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Aranda co-organized *e-flux video rental*, which began in 2004 and is an ongoing archive of artist videos, many of which can be circulated for home viewing free of charge (with membership). The artist Martha Rosler, whose work is in PAWNSHOP, and who had collaborated with Vidokle on *Martha Rosler Library*, was also present for the discussion and added: "The process element under scrutiny is circulation, not the network of producers. Each project is independent from another, though there is a certain resemblance of one to another in how they are developed. They draw on an unconscious interest in certain elements of the art world, but it's not about having a stable of producers who are your friends. They actually delegated selection and left open PAWNSHOP. It's a presupposition of viewers in the art world, perhaps, that there is a curatorial element involved that draws upon the producers that are a particular kind of person— people like us. I think that's kind of missing the focus of the e-flux project."

<sup>3</sup> Anton Vidokle, in preparatory correspondence about the project. (If you thought galleries were profiteers, with their commissions hovering between 30 and 50 percent, or that auction houses were outrageous in their disregard for artists themselves, imagine if pawnshops, with their characteristic exploitation of misfortune, became the source of income for artists!) I feel the discussion on distribution would be somewhat artificially limited if we didn't mention at least in passing the alternative represented by community or even state funding that, despite the stereotype of top-down cultural bureaucracy, is in many instances the result of political demands and struggles made by artists.

out of step with what Vidokle and e-flux have previously realized, which includes several iterations of projects resembling or actualizing educational institutions or programs, and which therefore involve the establishment of space as prerequisite.<sup>4</sup> As discussed elsewhere, Anton Vidokle's role in these projects is that of a contemporary host: a sort of authorship that involves the formation of situations conducive to the appearance of other voices and "free spirits."<sup>5</sup> Thus to be a contemporary author inevitably entails the qualities and skills of a host, and is not something fully realizable alone.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibition-as-school projects take on the academy as one of the few remaining models that encourage experimentation and process over production and exhibition of objects, so although they produce discourses and debates of value (of value to the art world, but in the first instance of value to Anton Vidokle and his collaborators themselves), they also should be seen as critiques of the current systems that parcel functions off to their appropriate contexts and faculties. Maria Lind has categorized e-flux projects as an "institution building" variation of a tradition of institutional critique. What Vidokle has said of the school projects would therefore remain true for PAWNSHOP: "It can engage with an institution (...) but it does not completely depend on institutions to manifest itself."<sup>7</sup> After all, PAWNSHOP's first appearance was not in an art space, but in a storefront in Manhattan, and as I said above, the work's logic demands and creates a particular relationship to institutions based on mutuality rather than dependency. Whether the work appears in a museum, in a commandeered building, or we receive it in our inboxes (2008 saw the creation of the energetic and freely distributing *e-flux journal*) it always insists on a level of autonomy more characteristic of institutions. This is a clear consequence of following through with certain impulses of modernism, but because we are quite used to an art system with its tacit understanding of distinct functions, it can cause us to identify PAWNSHOP at first as a curatorial project of the space in which it appears.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Including unitednationsplaza (2006-2007), unitednationsplaza Mexico City (2008), and Night School (2008-2009).

<sup>5</sup> On hosting as authorship and authorship as hosting, see Jan Verwoert's contribution to *Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat*.

<sup>6</sup> In his article in *Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat* the artist Liam Gillick (who also collaborated on unitednationsplaza) stated of Vidokle: "He cannot control or express or speak for the project as a whole; this is a sign of its success."

<sup>7</sup> Anton Vidokle, "Opening Remarks Night School," New Museum, January 31, 2008. Available: [www.newmuseum.org/.../Anton\\_Vidokle\\_Night\\_School\\_Opening\\_Remarks.pdf](http://www.newmuseum.org/.../Anton_Vidokle_Night_School_Opening_Remarks.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See Boris Groys' article "An Autonomous Artist" in *Produce, Distribute, Discuss, Repeat*. Also, Anton Vidokle: "One of the qualities that defines our contemporary notion of art is a certain claim to artistic sovereignty, that historically became possible with the emergence of a public and of institutions of art, around the time of the French Revolution. An artist today can aspire to such sovereignty, which implies that, in addition to producing art, one also has to produce the conditions that enable such production and its channels of circulation. The production of these conditions can become so critical to the work that it assumes the shape of the work itself – such is the case with UNP [unitednationsplaza]." "UNP and the building" in *frieze* magazine (January-February 2010), p. 114.

Coming back to the pawned objects persisting in the space, these individual artworks that in many cases are marked by the questions of value, we can wonder further at why it should be laughable they have been turned over for such low prices. Of course, art's value has been a significant question for artists in general (before and after the tragicomic financial crisis), but in PAWNSHOP this question is acted out in a consensual and self-conscious way by an assembly of artists who all recognize that the value they produce is incredibly slippery.<sup>9</sup> At our discussion, Martha Rosler pointed out of e-flux: "I would also like to add that the question of value in art underlies many of these projects. The question is: How does an artwork gain value? That would apply to something like video, which in so many ways is an absurd kind of commodity because of its reproducibility; and a book, which is about intellectual community rather than the thing itself; and of course PAWNSHOP is about an assumption of slippage in value." The pawnshop is a place where value is routinely misplaced; where the man behind the counter doesn't care about the gold ring's sentimental value, only its selling price; and where the man behind the counter can sometimes be "wrong" (allowing a pawnshopper to find a gold ring for less than its market value). The pawned artwork is a specimen for inquiries into the attribution of value in contemporary art, as the object's value is often indecipherable on its surface, and yet the man behind the counter must give it a price.

The beginnings of this inquiry are accessed through the particulars of the inventory we see displayed in PAWNSHOP. Although e-flux might insist that as an artwork their PAWNSHOP is a format and immaterial structure (an intellectual property), these are made visible and activated and the project is realized in an integral way as a process of correspondence and collection, of paying out pawning fees and potentially accruing profits from subsequent sales, and of manifesting as a real place housing real objects once they have been collected. Because of this complex set of relations, for me the most interesting understanding of the work's form is in its entirety, as a functioning economic micro-system, which means simultaneously both as an *artwork* and as *not-an-artwork*. I don't mean that art practices like those of Vidokle's and his collaborators mean it's time to redraw the map of medium hierarchies and the arbitrary exclusions those necessitate, but that assigning value to an endeavor need not be done in deference to its status as art.<sup>10</sup> While it doesn't make what you see in PAWNSHOP totally crystal clear, it is a difference that keeps us awake at night turning the question of the value of art over in our heads, like a reality pill.

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<sup>9</sup> For a brief categorization of some of the slippery pawned items see Robin Peckham's review "e-flux PAWNSHOP at the shop": <http://kunsthallekowloon.org/archives/148>. I don't mean to suggest by this that the value of everything else but art is well founded.

<sup>10</sup> And I believe Vidokle and his collaborators know this—"While I thought of it specifically as an art project, I cannot say for sure that it meant the same to other contributors, such as Groys for example, who don't define themselves as artists." Vidokle on unitednationsplaza, in "UNP and the Building," *frieze*, p. 115.