

Free City

December 4th to 8th 2024 (6-10pm), StadtWerkstatt Adlerhalle, Mehringdamm 20 Berlin

Artists: Maxim Brandt, Susan Buckow, Elizabeth Charnock, Selin Davasse, CC.Gambeex, Victoria Etherington, Ae Hee Lee, Andrey Kharitonov, Diana Karlssone, Sarah Lüdemann (Beauham), Pauline Maure, Andrea Mineo, Lara Nelke, Paulette Penje, Milena Pysareva, PrismOcean, Sarefo, Sophie Seita, Chan Seth, Francesca Tambussi, Max Blax, Magic Mind, Neuronal Noise, Drugstore Beetles.

What's real is what doesn't come with a price tag, because it's done out of belief, not because someone is getting paid. Also, what's given for free can often carry hidden costs. Sometimes this cost only becomes clear to the receiver too late. In manipulative system models, what looks free can turn into people themselves becoming the product (e.g., social networks, dating apps, or free coupons). Even if free stuff or services does not turn us into products, it might come with other kinds of costs, like the "Take-baker"(1).

Still, there are moments when gifts are perfectly free, perceived as something beautiful and genuine. It happens when both the giver and receiver share the cost, like inviting someone to dinner. Even if one person insists on paying, the other insists on contributing, and together they create something better than eating alone.

But in life, just like in restaurants, the bill doesn't come split unless you ask for it. Sometimes a split bill is easier than a split friendship we all know as we go through life.

The reason why something freely given is so powerful in our society is because it escapes the politics of costs & profit and enters a new/oldest practice, the one of Responsibility. The responsibility of the receiver is to use it wisely, to put it back into circulation in a way that enriches others, and not let it go to waste or use it for its own profit.

Ultimately, the reason we grew up so much in a capitalist system is because responsibility looks so unpredictable in some scary aspects.

Lewis Hyde, in *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (2), talks about how art, like gifts, works best when it's shared and keeps moving. Art is a gift, and gifts are powerful enough to change the world. And yet, the system of profit tries the impossible to monopolize the valuation of gifts, reducing their power to mere commodities. Or in the case of other gifts, the system is trying to do the best to spike the price at the inconceivable, making ordinary people more angry and skeptical toward contemporary art than they already were e.g., "Comedian" 2019 by Maurizio Cattelan (3).

If for free things there might be hidden costs, the hidden cost of a gift might emerge in the imbalance between giver and receiver, or between love and wisdom: the failure to share it, use it, or multiply its impact. When a giver exhausts themselves, offering their heart to an ungrateful recipient or someone incapable of self-love, the gift becomes a burden.

This idea resonates with the dream of a Free City, where resources, services, and costs are shared in a fair way between the city's infrastructure and its users.

For years, higher taxation has been seen as a way to ensure better quality of life in cities, and this holds true up to a point. But when the reclamation of these services becomes so complex that even the most creative spirits and determined individuals give up, living in the city no longer feels worthwhile. What we're left with isn't the abuse of power by old aristocracies; it's a democratic tyranny also called a Soft tyranny (4). French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (5), predicted this back in the 1840s. Tocqueville wrote about how modern governments wouldn't crush people with violence but instead smother them with endless rules and regulations. It's a kind of soft control that stops people from rising above the crowd or doing something meaningful. It doesn't destroy people outright but slowly weakens and stifles them. People lose their creativity and independence, and society ends up like a herd of sheep, with the government as the shepherd.

A city that turns art into mere commodities is no longer a city of the living but of demons. In a city that used to be "poor but sexy" (6) and is now even poorer and privatized, we can show another way. Even if we're small in the scale of such a large system, whether we're artists, creatives, or musicians, we have the power of gifting, which is grandiose. The gift, when genuine, is multiplying exponentially and turning things around unexpectedly. If the city is giving us something, as small as a space for art, a shelter, or a space for cooperation such as StadtWERKSTATT in Berlin (7), let's share this gift and put it back into circulation in a way that enriches others so that the chain of gift is on.

Over five days, from December 4th to 8th 2024, Free City (8) an exhibition co-curated by 24 artists, transforms the hybrid contested infrastructure of StadtWerkstatt Kreuzberg, Berlin, into a space for cooperation, dialogue, music performances, rituals, screenings, enjoyment, physical activities, and unpredictability. It acts as a counter-reaction to the growing inaccessibility and privatization of urban spaces, as well as cuts to cultural funding. The show invites artists to curate activities, and create situation that explore the concept of an ideal Free City, potentially serving as a model for urban realities.

The show is pushing the boundaries of space and time beyond the traditional role of an exhibition venue. The program remains partially open, embracing the unpredictability inherent in its process to show that the idea of an inclusive, accessible city isn't just a dream. It's something real.

Andrea Mineo 2024

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1. *Take-Backer: a person giving something and taking it back or someone expecting something in return.*
 2. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (1983)
 3. In November 2024 the artwork titled "Comedian" 2019 by Maurizio Cattelan, a banana taped on the wall was sold at an auction at Sotheby's for \$6.2 million.
 4. Soft tyranny wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_tyranny
 5. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1840)
 6. In November 2003, the governing mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit (SPD), quipped in an interview, "Berlin is poor but sexy".
 7. <https://www.baustelle-gemeinwohl.de/stadtwerkstatt/>
 8. www.mayerpavilion.com/free-city