

The power of the gift

For the Maori of New Zealand, the thing given has a spirit (Hau). The obligation to reciprocate comes from the very nature of the thing given which, far from being inert and passive, is said to be endowed with a "spirit" that weighs upon the recipient like an external force, until it compels him to give in return.

According to this theory, the "spirit of the thing given" originates in the trace that individuals leave on the objects of the various forms of exchange.

The artist leaves the same imprint by handling the material of his own work.

Although our world today is governed by the use of money, art ought to manage to free itself at least in part from the logic of accumulating wealth, in order to rise to a different role: to become a field in which mutual trust between human beings can be tried out.

I am not willing to see myself reflected in the lie about money that is told to me every day. I believe the artist is bound to think differently, and this is why I perform this useless gesture - so that it may sprout in time and give us something new.

If you cannot see the sense or the use of it, we are on the right track.

The interest that this senseless uselessness manages to arouse is the very energy that drives me to keep working without pause.

It is a fact that if everyone gave according to their means, most of the world's problems would be solved; and if we were then certain that giving a hundred would bring back a thousand, we would spend most of our time looking for a present for someone - if only by getting rid of what is ours and of no use to us.

We know that the six faces of a die have the same probability of coming up at every throw; if we throw a die a million times, we know that the six faces will come up in equal numbers. And yet, if we throw the die only once, we still think the result is random.

Life itself is an apparently random gift, and yet there are those who spend the whole of it trying to poison other people's, hoarding for themselves whatever they can take from their neighbours, living in the fear of losing everything.

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The gift is a total social fact, based on the principle of reciprocity, which implies a large measure of freedom. It is true that there is an obligation to give in return, but the ways and the timing are not rigid, and in any case it is a moral obligation, not actionable at law nor

open to sanction. The value of the gift lies in the absence of guarantees for the giver - an absence that presupposes great trust in others.

Marcel Mauss (The Gift, 1923)

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