Art beyond the object? Art beyond grad school? (a Kickstarter fundraiser): Help me complete my MFA and kickstart my life as an artist.

Hsini D. Leary
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Art beyond the object? Art beyond grad school? (a Kickstarter fundraiser): Help me complete my MFA and kickstart my life as an artist.

by

Hsin-I Desiree Sechler Leary

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2016

Thesis Sponsor:

Dec 11, 2016 Paul Ramirez Jonas
Date Signature

Dec 11, 2016 Constance DeJong
Date Signature of Second Reader
Acknowledgements

A huge amount of gratitude is due to so many people who have supported my work over the
years. A very special thank you goes out to my thesis advisor, Paul Ramirez Jonas, my mom, and
Andrew.
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Art beyond the object? Art beyond grad school?  
(a Kickstarter fundraiser)

My Project

While in graduate school I’ve been working on projects that reach beyond any single, traditional art object. Rather than limit my work to the confines of a singular painting, photograph, or sculpture, I try to take both the context and experience of an artwork into account. With my photographs I create multiples that are given away for free or at low cost. Instead of exhibiting expensive, precious, limited-edition photographic prints, I prefer to make postcards and posters the viewer can take home and look at on their own terms. These multiples are awarded as prizes, sent through the mail, or distributed in public giveaways. With these non-traditional modes of access and distribution for artwork, I hope to encourage conversations about art and community.

The goal of this fundraiser is to enable the production of my last semester’s work and thesis exhibition, and also to aid in the post-graduation transition to a sustainable art practice that does not rely on the current gallery structure. The Kickstarter platform provides a new way of accessing and distributing my work and ideas. My campaign can be seen at:

fig. 1

Thesis exhibition - *Dollar Days: Cash & Carry*

For my thesis exhibition I will present *Dollar Days: Cash & Carry* which addresses the reality of graduation, plays with merchandising and the manipulation of value, as well as my true desire: to get rid of as much as possible.
As my time at Hunter comes to an end, I must relinquish my “free” studio and contend with the realities of being an artist in NYC, where the current market monthly rent for studio space is $3/square foot. Over the years, part of my process has been collecting potential art materials from stoops or second-hand stores. I’ve accumulated too many things to move, but still see so much value in all of these objects (which seems a common problem, as I am, afterall, not the first owner of these items). I don’t want to throw anything away, so in effort to lighten my load, I’ve been having an ongoing liquidation sale out of my studio— Dollar Days ($1 and up), and the Honor System Hallway Sale ($1). I haven’t been keeping detailed transaction records, but as of the end of October I’ve probably made $75–100 selling items, including vintage projection screens, a yoga mat bag, IKEA sawhorse table legs, PVC pipes and fittings, under-the-bed
storage boxes, shirts (various), a rotary telephone, chalkboard, roll of mirrored adhesive paper, rolling pin, bean bag chair, storage basket, metal pitcher, dictionary, inflatable dice, spray paint and fixative, rolls of vinyl, old Epson matte heavyweight paper, bundles of colored corrugated cardboard, strips of balsa wood strips, a white wall shelf, and more. I really enjoy the moments when people find the things they need or want.

fig. 3

My goal is to unload as much stuff as possible before moving day, January 8, 2017. I am repackaging (packaging for sale) my studio materials (toys, games, home decor, craft and building supplies, and other items), creating vignettes based on theme, color, shape, and other qualities. These “products” will be available for purchase at low cost ($5 and up) throughout the duration of the exhibition and can be used as: imaginative games, kits for making art, for their
original function (i.e. tongs can be used to pick something up), or as art objects in and of
themselves. A catalog of numbered descriptions of each item will be available. The honor system
will be in place for items $15 and under.

As a gesture against the commercial art market, where sales are split 50/50 between gallery and
artist, and at a time when social justice and environmental organizations need support, 50% of
the proceeds from this sale will benefit the Water Protector Legal Collective (formerly Red
Owl), the nonprofit legal organization on-site at the #NoDAPL resistance camps.

**The Art Beyond the Object**

I’ve found that devising games and situations for exchange are great ways to engage various
audiences, using the art of the experience and the art of the object to communicate. I regard the
whole experience of playing, winning, and then owning prizes as part of the artwork itself—even
if the objects end up given or thrown away. I acknowledge that I have no control over how these works are handled or regarded, but I’m more excited about what unknown life and significance the art might go on to have—especially as it might differ from the somewhat rote and narrow experience of market-driven gallery-bound work. Presenting my work outside of a typical exhibition space allows me to distribute it on my own terms (to who I want, at the price I deem fair, with affection, and without giving a gallery 50%)—in fact, the distribution itself is, again, conceived of as part of the art.

fig. 6
For example, I staged *Let’s Roll at Night*—a simple game of chance—with the support of curatorial team Game Night at the annual *Come Out and Play* festival held in DUMBO, Brooklyn. My game cost no money to play; instead, patrons were asked to log 25 of their thoughts on a worksheet in order to participate. People were prompted by the words, “I think…” at the top of the page, and a table sign had other prompts such as, music, guns, technology, someone you like, climate, existence, TV, race, the world, vacation, fashion, feelings, religion, dessert, and art. Several people started off with, “I think I can,” and at about the halfway point thoughts moved to “My hand hurts.” Coincidentally multiple people write about the bubbles from my bubble machine starting around the 19th thought. One poetic person’s consecutive thoughts even seemed to slant rhyme:

11. I like my friend Diddy.
12. Diddy likes me less than I like him.
13. I want to visit Paris.

I was so impressed with how much of themselves each of the 150 players put into their 25 thoughts—that’s 3750 thoughts shared in a single night! Once this task was completed, they rolled an oversized dice to win prizes—but they always had a choice among many, like at a carnival midway, arcade, or on a gameshow. They could choose a snack or one of my original art multiples. I presided somewhat like a circus Barker or Monty Hall: “Everyone’s a winner!” Wary of freebies, suspicious of giveaways, but always keeping an eye out for novelty or deals, each participant was able to make a personal selection. I am not interested in keeping track of what people choose—rather, I’m simply interested in providing that choice. The collected thoughts will eventually be bound into a book, with a companion workbook for the reader to collect his/her own thoughts. *Can you find the art in this?*
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>dogs are people too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Bernie Sanders is a good name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I disagree with all of Donald Trump policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>But his name is also pretty decent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>hot dogs were named by the same guy who named hot dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>it takes a long time to get to Brooklyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Brooklyn is hipper than Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>cupcake is hipper than the Bronx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The Bronx is hipper than Staten Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>red bricks look good for houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I like my friend Diddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Diddy likes me less than I like him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I want to visit Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I want to visit Berlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Domino's is underrated for pizza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>my dad should stop using an AOL account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>it's perfectly normal to be attractive to yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Bobby's For Apples is not short for Bobby's For Apples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>I'm running out of thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>I want to tell you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>my favorite song is Summertime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>my favorite time of year is summertime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>my favorite herb is summer thyme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Summer thyme is not an evil herb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>I'm out of thoughts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GAME NIGHT**

**COME OUT AND PLAY**

*July 3, 2016*
Global Horny

*Don’t Honk if You’re Horny* is an ongoing project that I started in 2015.

With Hunter’s MFA studios situated at entrance of the Holland Tunnel, the noise of constant honking, especially during rush hour, pollutes the environment. In an attempt to combat the honking I painted the words, “Don’t Honk if You’re Horny” on the window of my studio, which faced eastbound traffic on Canal and Watts Streets. While the honking didn’t necessarily stop (maybe it lessened), for me, the words shifted my perspective on the noise. Just think about all those un-horny people stuck in traffic :(
But when it’s silent ;) 

After a couple of months the painted words were removed at the request by a neighboring building. This censorship led me to bring my message to the street in the form of bumper stickers. During rush hour, I handed out *Don’t Honk if You’re Horny* bumper stickers to cars, trucks, buses, and taxis stuck in traffic.

For this year’s political season, I’ve designed a new bumper sticker and brochure to mail to my 200+ constituents, as well as a few others—like the MTA department presidents; the NYC Taxi and Limousine Commission; the commissioners of Transportation and Cultural Affairs; Hugh Hefner; Brooklyn Woodwind & Brass (a horn retailer); President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama; Vice President Joe Biden; Bernie 2016; Hillary for America; Bill Clinton; the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s musical instruments department; magician David Blaine; Lynne Tillman; Brian Lehrer; and many artists I admire. *Don’t know who to vote for? Don’t honk if you’re horny!*
I believe this work cannot be weakened by appropriation—in fact, that would only strengthen the Global Horny movement. It would warm my heart if the *Don’t Honk if You’re Horny* phrase was co-opted into mass consumer culture, emblazoned on a t-shirt hanging outside a souvenir shop on Canal Street in New York City, or among the graphic tees at an Urban Outfitters or Hot Topic.

**Cuba Questions**

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to visit Cuba with a group of artists and art historians. Before going, I sent postcards to friends and family asking if there was anything they wanted me to find out for them while I was there. The questions I received gave me things to look for and
learn about while in Havana. I formed a set of keywords based on these questions, which I often referred to and also shared with my travel group, so they too could gather cultural intelligence and report back.

![Havana postcard](image10)

**fig. 10**

![Postcard](image11)

**fig. 11**
Being there was incredible—and fortunately, the group I was traveling with was also incredible. I was able to experience so much by their sides and through retellings of each of their individual experiences. After the trip, I asked them to fill out a questionnaire where they shared any information pertinent to five select keywords of their choice and one kindergartener’s deceptively penetrating question: “What is Cuba about?”

I’m working on a response mailing that takes the form of a folded brochure, incorporating a compendium of questions and answers. I plan to mail responses to 150–200 people, as well as publish the brochure digitally on my website.

**Budget:**

- Finishing funds for *Don’t Honk if You’re Horny: Global Horny Campaign* - $375 for printing and postage
- Finishing funds for *Cuba Questions* brochure- $350 for printing and postage
- New work - $1000 for printing, packaging materials, various supplies
- Exhibition - $200 for assistants for the opening, lights, display furniture, transportation
- Overhead - $400 (Kickstarter fee, based on $5,000 goal)
- Transition to artist life - moving costs, new studio rent and deposit, supplies, printing costs, starting something, trying some things out, etc. - $2675

**TOTAL: $5,000**

**Countdown to art after grad school:**

- Dec 8th - Opening of MFA Thesis Exhibition
- Jan 7th - MFA Thesis Exhibition closing and performance night
- Jan 9th - Must vacate studio
- Jan 20th - Hunter temporary storage ends

Who is Desiree Des?

Desiree is an artist living in NYC. She also goes by Des. She is in the final semester of her MFA in Studio Art at Hunter College.

Desiree was born in Taipei, Taiwan and raised in Chambersburg, PA. She received a BFA in Studio Art from Alfred University and a Master’s degree in Library and Information Science from Rutgers University. She has been the recipient of the Institute for Electronic Art Print Residency (Alfred, NY), and her work has been seen in BOMB Magazine, on the cover of Conjunctions, at SARDINE Gallery (Brooklyn), on the Global Programs Office bulletin board at the Guggenheim, at Come Out and Play Festival (Brooklyn), and on a billboard at Broadway and 174th Street (NYC) with the generous support of 14x48.org.

You can see more work at desireedes.com.

What’s in it for you?

No Zonks! Great rewards! Eternal gratitude and good vibes. All Kickstarter backers will receive a free gift at my MFA exhibition opening (Dec 8, 2016, 6-8pm), and be acknowledged on my website as a supporter (optional).

$5 - Thank You Postcard

A snail-mailed postcard of one of my photographs will be posted to you.
$10 - Winner Eraser

A fully functional laser-etched Pink Pearl eraser for all the winner’s mistakes.
S10 - Photo Shop Poster

For me, photography is not just about capturing a moment and making a composition; it’s also about a careful consideration of how a picture, so often confined to the digital realm, can exist as an object in the world. How and where does it sit in space? How might other objects interact with it? And, importantly, how might it activate a viewer? How does it change over time? I’ve explored these notions by reproducing my photographic images within the pages of books, as posters, on blankets, stretched canvas, dining plates, and elsewhere. I’m particularly interested in the poster form, as it is easier to acquire than a painting, print, or large format photograph, and generally not too expensive to make many copies. It is less precious than many art objects, and easily hung on your wall or ceilings with common tape or tacks.

fig. 14
The *Photo Shop Poster* in particular seems to announce its objectness, and that of the photographic objects it depicts, while also putting them into question. At first glance, the image appears to have been composited using Adobe’s Photoshop computer software, but, in fact, it is a straightforward snapshot of the interior of a photo lab in Venice, Italy. It’s something like a readymade compilation of photo objects, and as such, a profile not just of the person seen in the reflection or the architectural space, but of photography in a broader sense.
The *Roller Coaster Poster* is made up of two curiously enjambed photographs—one of the Mall of America in Minneapolis, MN, and the other in my neighborhood of Fort Greene in Brooklyn, NY. It’s also been the starting point for many explorations within my practice, including the *Roller Coaster Poster Sculpture*, the *Roller Coaster Poster Sculpture Poster*, and the *Exquisite Roller Coaster*—a community drawing project where participants received a *Roller Coaster Poster* for contributing to a long, double-sided drawing on a spool of receipt paper.
$20 - Poster Pair!

You will receive BOTH the *Photo Shop Poster* and the *Roller Coaster Poster*!

$27 - Button of the Month Club 2017

You will receive one button in the mail every month for one year, beginning January 2017.

Featuring a wide variety of imagery culled from magazines, catalogs, and my own photographs, these buttons are a long-running part of my practice. Their size and round shape recalls that of a coin, and indeed I often use them as an alternate form of currency. They’re fantastic worn on clothing, and juxtapose mass produced commercial images with your very own outfit. *A unique accessory!* *Makes a great gift!*
$50 - Dinner Plate (various) + Roller Coaster Poster
fig. 19

Printed with my own photographs of edible and non-edible subjects, these 9” melamine dinner plates are meant for dining, though they also look great on a wall. Your actual meal is heaped on top of the image, and as you eat, the composition is altered in surprising ways.

$54 - Button of the Month Club 2017 for TWO

You and a friend will receive one button in the mail every month for one year, beginning January 2017.
$250 - Bingo Game for 50 people for up to 2 hours, in NYC

Parties, company retreats, open studios, orientations—all can create anxiety. Conversation can be awkward or non-existent. My bingo game will break the ice by giving participants different qualities to seek out in others and their surroundings. It provides a framework for asking questions and spurring on interactions beyond the mundane. How do we consider one another? How do we consider the space we’re in?

I have hosted such games in the past for Hunter’s “Open Studios,” where I set out to foster connections between visitors and the artists, studios, and works on display. All too often this event is conducted without enough dialogue. By designing a bingo card that encouraged visitors to contemplate and question things, and also provided them with the vocabulary and cues to do so, various groups were brought together in a more substantive way.

I have also successfully hosted this game at singles’ mixers, birthday parties, student orientations, and other venues. The casually collected information is useful in providing
feedback to the artists who opened their studios, and for knowing who is looking for a roommate and who is good at math.

It's a great game to play with kids to teach them about art!

— “Open Studio Bingo” participant
Large birthday parties tend to force 2 or 3 groups of people together over a common friend. The groups stick to their familiar friends out of comfort. Birthdate Bingo was an interesting antidote to this social problem. I found myself getting caught up in funny, strange, and lovely conversations about unexpected and unusually specific topics with new people. It fostered connection and laughter in a context that might have otherwise included awkward moments and silence.

— “Birthdate Bingo” party-goer
$500 - Stoop Sale Artist. I’ll be your extra hands in helping clear out closets and having a stoop sale, in NYC only (2 days max).

fig. 23

I will come to your home or business to help you clear out unwanted items and set up a stoop sale (safety permitting). Two days maximum. Is there art in a stoop sale?

$1000 - I will try to quiet the intersection of your choice by handing out Don’t Honk if You’re Horny bumper stickers for 1 hour, in continental US.
Stretch Goals

My long-term goal is to create a sustainable life for myself as a full-time artist. Because my work often takes the form of printed matter, I’m considering starting a press and distribute multiples wholesale to retailers. I would love to teach using games.

NYC artist expenses:

- Studio rent in NYC ($3/sq ft!), 1 year - $7,000
- Materials and supplies - $5,000
- Transportation - $300

Also hoping for:
• Annual artist salary >$35,000, doing what?
• Health care
• Pay off all student loans > $100,000
  ○ A year of Architecture school, BFA Studio Art, Master in Library Information Science, MFA Studio Art
• Retirement fund for the future

Fine Artists do not generally earn higher incomes from more experience in the field. People who have worked for fewer than five years bring home $36K on average. Median compensation in the five-to-10 year group, however, is higher at approximately $41K. Fine Artists claiming one to two decades of experience make an estimated median of $50K. Respondents who claim more than 20 years of experience may encounter pay that doesn't quite reflect their extensive experience; these veterans report a median income of around $52K.
Risks and challenges

It’s possible some people won’t think it’s art.

FAQ

What is Social Practice Art?

From Wikipedia:

Social practice is an art medium that focuses on social engagement, inviting collaboration with individuals, communities, and institutions in the creation of participatory art. It is also referred to by a range of different names: public practice, socially engaged art, community art, new-genre public art, participatory art, interventionist art, collaborative art, relational art and dialogical aesthetics. Social practice art came about in response to increasing pressure within art education to work collaboratively through social and participatory formats.

Artists working in social practice co-create their work with a specific audience or propose critical interventions within existing social systems that inspire debate or catalyze social exchange. Social practice artwork focuses on the interaction between the audience, social systems, and the artist through topics such as aesthetics, ethics, collaboration, persona, media strategies, and social activism. The social interaction component inspires, drives, or, in some instances, completes the project. Although projects may incorporate traditional studio media, they are realized in a variety of visual or social forms (depending on variable contexts and participant demographics) such as performance, social activism, or mobilizing communities towards a common goal.

More about Desiree Des at desireedes.com/about

More about the Hunter College Studio Art MFA program at http://www.mfa205hudson.org

Reward Tiers

All backers receive a free gift at the Hunter MFA Thesis Exhibition Opening and be acknowledged as a supporter on desireedes.com (optional).

$5 - Mailed Thank You Postcard

$10 - Winner Eraser
$10 - Roller Coaster Poster

$10 - Photo Shop Poster

$27 - Button of the Month Club

$54 - Button of the Month Club for TWO

$50 - Dinner Plate + Roller Coaster Poster

$100 - Poster Pair: Roller Coaster Poster AND Photo Shop Poster + Dinner Plates for 2

$250 - Bingo game for 50 people for up to 2 hours, in NYC for your next party or fundraiser.

$500 - Stoop sale at your place. I’ll help you clear out closets, in NYC

$1000 - I will try to quiet the intersection of your choice (safety permitting) and hand out Don’t Honk if You’re Horny Bumper Stickers for 1 hour, in continental US
References


Image List

Exhibition Installation Views
Hsin-I Desiree Leary, Dollar Days: Cash & Carry MFA Thesis Exhibition
December 8, 2016 - January 10, 2017

26. Installation view of east wall,
27. Installation view of wall display
28. Installation view of shelf display
29. Installation view of Marble Madness display
30. Installation view of Home Decor corner
31. Installation view of complimentary thesis paper and catalog, Kickstarter video, slideshow
32. Installation view of Beach Ball Massager, Loop Light, Don’t Honk if You’re Horny Vuvuzelas
33. Installation view of wall display
34. Installation view of Wishing Well
35. Installation view of Don’t Honk if You’re Horny Vuvuzelas
36. Installation view of wall and floor display
37. Installation view of west wall
Installation Photographs

Exhibition installation of *Dollar Days: Cash & Carry*, December 2016. All photos courtesy of the artist.

fig. 26
fig. 35
fig. 36
fig. 37
Supplemental Media List

Academic Works uploads:

- Video slide show of each item in Dollar Days: Cash & Carry
- Dollar Days: Cash & Carry Catalog of exhibition items
- Kickstarter video