

*Localization, Location, Ubicación,*  
*Lenzner Family Gallery, Pitzer College, Claremont, CA*  
*Jan 28-March 19, 2010*  
*A Conversation between Ciara Ennis and Carla Herrera-Prats*

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*In his 1922 book *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss analyzes different models of a gift economy that can be seen as a form of resistance to an expanding market economy. Mauss describes how the exchange of objects between groups builds relationships among them. Giving a gift triggers an inherent obligation on the part of the receiver to reciprocate the gift. The resulting series of exchanges between groups hence provides one of the earliest forms of social solidarity.*

*Localization, Location, Ubicación* departs from this notion of solidarity, working with Mauss's analysis in the context of a regulated system of gift-giving common to us. Carla Herrera-Prats's project consists of making and donating a gift—in the form of a book—to a host of libraries, institutions and research centers that deal with questions of immigration, labor in Canada, the United States and Mexico. This gift functions as a bridge linking the participating institutions together and examines the way knowledge production and art are formed, disseminated and organized. As a "true gift," the book requires the reciprocity and participation of its receivers to exist. The book itself consists of photographs and descriptions—provided by the participating libraries—of the shelves where Herrera-Prats's book is to reside once it is printed. Once accepted, the book is put into the libraries' circulation and distribution system and listed in various subject categories, including art.

*Carla Herrera-Prats will present this project, including the pictures and a series of drawings, at the the Lenzner Family Art Gallery from Jan 28 to March 19, 2010*

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Ciara Ennis: The culmination of your project, *Localization, Location, Ubicación*, is a book that you refer to as a "gift" that refers directly to Marcel Mauss's theory of 'Gift Economy,' which states that a gift's recipient is always indebted and obligated to respond in some way. Do you feel that Mauss's theory is particularly relevant to artists' practice today, and if so, how?

Carla Herrera-Prats: I am interested in the collaborative aspect between giver and receiver that is embedded in Mauss's theory. Mauss showed that the act of giving is actually a concatenation of three obligations: giving, receiving and making a return gift. Claude Lévis-Strauss thought that this chain of exchanges was fundamental in Western society, which according to him can only exist through the combination of all sorts of transactions: woman (kinship), goods (economy) and representation and words (culture).

I think many artists today, especially given the current economic climate, are seeking ways to communicate and exchange both ideas and objects in ways that don't set easily within the conventions of traditional market economics. Mauss's observations decades ago on cultures of the Pacific are in some ways mirrored in some of today's art practices, where not only individuality but also collectivity implies an obligation to give and give-back. Examples are wide-ranging, from the Yes Men's distribution of ersatz newspapers, to the new pedagogic models of free MFA program, to the spate of Wikis being built across the network.

CE: Given the laboriousness of your project and the demands made upon the institutions with whom you are collaborating, were you surprised that only 25% of the organizations that you contacted responded? Do you think this is a reflection on the burdensome nature of the "gift," or a lack of understanding of the project?

CHP: I started this project knowing that it would be very difficult to actually convince the institutions that I contacted to collaborate with me. As a "true gift," this book comes with responsibilities on the part of the receiver (who needed to find a location for the book, take a picture, send it to me and then—perhaps even more difficult—to actually house the book). That is the burden aspect of the gift; it creates obligations. But overall, I was not surprised by the amount of positive responses and this is not because I was embracing failure as the M.O. of this project. I do think that setting up projects to fail can be tricky, because once failure is embraced then one can only succeed, which results in a contradiction.

I was only hoping to get enough material to show the great variety of organizations that are involved with topics of immigration and labor, such as research institutes, universities, libraries, not-for-profits, community groups, etc. Twenty-five institutions and organizations, out of the 160 that I contacted, ended up sending me pictures of their shelves. It might sound like a low percentage but it's important to consider that most of these institutions don't collect art or relate to it, and are highly specialized within their own field. They don't necessarily care about photography, but at least some of them were interested in linking their activities with each other through my project.

And to be sure, this project was a great challenge in terms of communication. The process entailed hundreds of emails and phone conversations with librarians, researchers and activists whose work I wanted to understand more in depth. Making this book was a way for me to be able to get into a dialogue with these people and the institutions with which they work. Nevertheless, I definitely think that some institutions that I contacted did not understand the invitation. Some didn't even reply to my initial email.

CE: The book functions as a inventory of every institution within the US, Canada and Mexico dedicated to labor and immigration in addition to a number of photographic museums; an appropriate and vital reference book for anyone interested in those subjects. However as a result of current economic times many of these specialized libraries are eliminating significant parts of their printed collection. Given this situation, why did you decide to create a physical book instead of an online publication? Do you believe that the

printed form still has some currency and if so how? And what are your thoughts about the future of the book and printed matter in general?

CHP: Many of the libraries and organizations that I contacted are struggling both because of budget cuts and the paradigmatic “digital” shift that is currently underway. More and more libraries are concentrating their efforts on digitizing their collection, and are getting rid of their books and other printed material. New acquisitions in many libraries are often digital archives and subscriptions to online magazines. For instance, some libraries that I contacted could not participate, since they don’t have enough staff members to respond to such an invitation. Two or three libraries had just closed down or were in the process of de-acquisitioning their collection. I decided to keep them in the book and exhibition because they clearly illustrate the transformation that we are living.

As I see it, making this book is very much like taking a picture. Photographs become obsolete as soon as one presses the shutter. But it is exactly this image that I want to keep as a reference for the future. This image shows the material forms under which knowledge is collected and produced today. We all know these forms are in constant change, which today presents a contradiction. It has never been so easy for an individual to print a book; let’s just think on the many “print on demand” companies that have recently popped-up. And at the same time, it has never been so needed for institutions to get rid of their print materials and embrace the digital era.

I refuse to react to this transformation nostalgically—that’s not the purpose of the book. Instead I want to embrace both possibilities. Once the exhibition at the Pitzer Gallery is de-installed, the books will be sent to their new homes; there was the suggestion that my collection be put online, and I am considering that. I am intrigued by the destiny of the printed book in the library, who will consult it and when ultimately it will be trashed. But I also want to provide a tool that is functional for research, open to the public and that can be updated.

CE: Related to the last question, do you regard these publications as artist books or something more utilitarian? If any of these institutions had an artist book section would they be shelved there?

CHP: I am very interested in artist books because it is very hard to define what actually constitutes one. This book can be considered an artist book because it’s a very small edition—it will cover only the number needed for distribution to the libraries/organizations that sent me their photo. It is also very carefully designed, printed and customized for each library/organization. Nevertheless it performs a real function. One can use it to learn about a number of institutions that are actively interested in immigration and labor rights. The selection of these institutions is subjective, and of course I am not including all of them, but I wanted to underline the very different approaches that this diverse set of associations and institutions have regarding the topic.

I guess your question forces me to think about the relationship between art and function, or what is the functionality of art. It’s hard for me to separate these two since I think art

always serves a function, aesthetically, politically, and so on. Since I am artist, I consider this project as an art project. Interestingly enough, only a few photography museums, whose collections actually contain artist books, agreed to collaborate with me and located my book within the artist book section. For the most part, the book will be placed in the reference book area or within labor/immigration materials organized alphabetically by author or subject. I enjoy thinking that what I consider an artist book can actually migrate to other sections.

CE: Given that your books are without ISBN numbers, what do you think will happen to them in the future? Will they remain on the shelves, disappear or be deliberately de-acquisitioned? If so, how do you feel about those possible outcomes for your project?

CHP: The decision not to have an ISBN number for the book comes from the desire that each library/organization invited would find a location for the book according to their classification systems and their interpretation of the book's content. I wanted them to pick that location and photograph it so that the surrounding titles would give my project context.

One of the aspects that I enjoy the most of open stack libraries is the way in which ideas and fields of knowledge can expand based on the sheer number of books made not just accessible but literally visible to the reader. By inserting a book that is difficult to categorize I hope to inject a serendipitous possibility for whoever chances upon the book. If I had provided an ISBN number, I think it would have been more difficult to create new maps and connections.

CE: The book is translated into English, Spanish and French, relating to the three countries that you inventoried. Why did you limit your project to the United States, Mexico and Canada and what specific connections were you hoping to draw between them?

CHP: Immigration and labor issues among these three countries have been part of a significant political agenda for many years. Even before NAFTA, there have been several agreements dealing with migrant workers between Mexico and the US, like the *Bracero* Program established during the Second World War. I am particularly interested in how nations define themselves apart from each other or collaborate with each other under the umbrella of globalization. This has created an interesting situation in North America, where the circulation of goods and investments is encouraged, while the free circulation of people is not. I have been addressing labor and immigration in this geographic area in other projects of mine. Now, the Pitzer galleries are in Claremont, California. Though Claremont is an affluent student town, the presence of immigrant workers is undeniable, as in most places in southern California. I wanted to provide a tool to engage students interested in this topic.

CE: The regimentation of the 24 framed works—focusing on each institution that responded to your request, translated in three languages and following an identical format continues in the tradition of the aesthetics of administration developed in the 60s, why

did you choose this particular mode of display and why is the book concealed from the gallery viewer?

CHP: Regarding the gallery installation, my decision was to present the material that allowed me to publish this book, but not actually have the book on display. Ultimately, I want to invite the viewer to visit the many libraries/organizations that I contacted, where they would be able to engage with historic and contemporary discourses around migration policies, labor movements and workers' rights. Having the book at the gallery space for consultation would have defeated that purpose. There will be a copy of it at the Denison library at the Claremont Colleges once the exhibition ends. For the installation, the decision was then to present the photos that were sent to me, crediting the librarians, researchers and activists who took them. These people, for the most part, are non-professional photographers with point and shoot cameras, who digitally compressed the images in order to send them via email. They are images of bookshelves, a subject matter with a long tradition in the history of photography; I am thinking here for example of Thomas Smillie's cyanotypes at the Smithsonian in the late nineteenth century, and of course the majestic pictures of libraries around the world by Candida Höfer. Yet in relation to these two examples, the aesthetics in my project play a very different role. Conceptual art informs the methodology and mode of presentation of this exhibition as you well stated. This mode allows me to emphasize the display of information, showing the process in which the project was constructed.

CE: Given the immensity of the subjects referred to in *Localization, Location, Ubicación*—specifically labor and immigration—how do you feel your project directly address these subjects?

CHP: These subjects are indeed immense, of course. Earlier I stated that art always had a function. It would be foolish to imagine that this project functions in any way other than discursively. But I do believe that generating a discourse can likewise generate pragmatic transformations regarding the rights of immigrants and workers. By linking these institutions/organizations, possible collaborations can emerge. By presenting this material in an academic art context, awareness can be created, even by simply showing the range of the organizational and political terrain on which labor issues rest.

CE: Have you worked with these issues before? If so, in what way does *Localization, Location, Ubicación* move this particular discussion forward?

CHP: In 2003 I started photographing establishments that provide money-transfer services, from barbershops and shoe stores, to businesses specializing exclusively in cashing-checks and money transferring. I am interested in the physicality of these places where, among other things, the second largest source of foreign income to Mexico is transacted. I have amassed an extensive archive of these pictures, with each one containing the store location and the name of the few source companies that collect the fees for each money transaction (such as Western Union or Money Gram). I photograph these places with a 35 mm camera as they are about to open in the morning. Their closed facades call attention to the shapes of the buildings as well as their signage. My archive is organized by date and location. I group together all the businesses I can photograph in

one morning according to their proximity to one another. This classification allows me to compare neighborhoods based on the density of migrant populations since, often, these stores are located where foreign workers live or work. The proliferation of these types of businesses speaks about the condition of our global economy, where migration towards the North, specifically the US, increases yearly. Although commercial agreements, such as NAFTA, allow for a cheaper and frequent exchange of capital and goods, human mobility is still restricted, even if obscurely supported. Undocumented workers in the US, sending money back to their countries of origin, are forced to pay expensive fees because they are denied the possibility of opening bank accounts. Language boundaries reshape the locations that I shoot into gathering points where workers who had recently arrived might connect with peers with whom they can identify. By focusing on the buildings as opposed to the workers, I try to respect the anonymity forced on immigrants due to their legal status in this country. Continuing my interest in labor issues, I am also preparing an exhibition for Sala de Arte Publico Siqueiros. I am inviting a group of artists who provide representations of contemporary workers in their projects. The exhibition will deal with issues of realism, re-enactment and fiction. I will work with Siqueiros', the Mexican muralist painter, archival material to provide a context for the exhibition.

CE: Ultimately, what do you want the viewer to take away with them when they leave the exhibition?

CHP: What viewers take away from the exhibit will depend on what types of viewers visit it. If we're talking about Claremont students, as I stated before, I hope the work gets them to think not only about immigration and labor, but also, even more generally about the management of information and the possibilities of gift economies. I want to encourage to think on what happen with objects of art once they live the gallery space. I hope in general that the project will allow a reflection upon who constitutes a worker and the audience's own relation with labor. I think that today defining the working class is harder than ever: work itself has become so fragmented and has overtaken all aspects of life—for many leisure is working time. For me, this project presents the possibilities of collaboration and the ways in which people care about their causes, as exemplified by the maintenance of library collections and people who responded to my original invitation.