

ARTS INTERVIEW

CREATIVE ECONOMY**New exhibition asks where our values are**

By Maggie Grimason

**Debtfair speaks candidly to economic realities we all struggle with.**

TAL BEERY

Debtfair is a project of Occupy Museums, which itself grew out of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. As Occupy Museums artist Noah Fischer described it, “a movement concerned with the pressing financial and social inequalities laid bare in the 2008 world.” There is a need to demystify the realities of working artists today, as UNM's Claire Staciewisc points out in her essay for the catalog for the upcoming exhibition *Currency: What Do You Value?*, opening this Saturday, Nov. 17 (6-8pm), at 516 ARTS (516 Central Ave. SW), the romantic ideal of the “starving artist” isn't a workable one in the real world. In this iteration of *Debtfair*, the economic concerns of New Mexico are evaluated. Staciewisc continued in her essay, “So how does the debt of New Mexican artists stack up to the debt of other Americans? And how does this debt affect the work of these artists? *Debtfair* surveyed New Mexican artists in order to determine the economic position of these

individuals and their overall relationship with their debt." Before the opening, Occupy Museums' Tal Beery, Arthur Polendo and Fischer talked about the long-running work and how it takes shape locally.

***Alibi*: What need did you see to highlight this topic?**

Fischer: When we last checked, 8 out of the 10 most expensive colleges were art schools. In order to train for their careers, artists often end up in unpayable debt situations that can lead to bad health, financial ruin and almost always, little to no time to make art while working precarious jobs to pay the rent and debt. This punishes poorer, less privileged artists the most and is the basis for an unequal art world. We also saw that politics in the arts focused on institutions or larger global issues but was often blinded to its own social and class realities and wanted to bring that into the picture. Then artists would begin to self organize and push back.

What have you learned over the course of curating *Debtfair*?

There are many ways to answer this. This would be my answer right now—we've learned so much from *Debtfair* over the years! Possibly the most striking thing we've learned is that there is a tremendous number of banks and individuals who are profiting greatly from our debt crisis. The sheer multitude of these institutions has been a big surprise for us. We have spent a lot of time mapping connections between these organizations, and understanding their trustees and other points of leverage in order to understand what effective strategies might exist toward a debtor's strike. The need to push back against the power of banks that trade debt is more vital than ever. The system, though, is incredibly complex and abstract, and it's been challenging to identify an individual or corporate target since people are in debt to so many different institutions. When we did this project at the Whitney Museum, we discovered that there are a few big companies behind the pool of smaller ones. BlackRock Inc, the world's largest asset management company at over 6 trillion assets, and their president, Larry Fink (who, by the way, was a major winner of the 2008 crash) ... have been our targets because BlackRock makes most of their money from our debts while Larry Fink is involved in the art world as a MoMA board member.



DebtFair has run in multiple cities around the U.S., including Houston.

COURTESY OF OCCUPY MUSEUMS

How do you think debt impacts art-making?

Debt is a drag, an anchor that keeps people from taking additional risk. This is as true for artists as it is for anyone else. But art requires risk taking. When an art student takes out a loan, or insurance refuses to pay after an accident or illness, or any other unexpected thing happens in an artist's life, the debt she incurs ties her down to steady employment and slows her process of experimentation and creative expansion. To be sure, lots of people who are in debt maintain active art practices. Debt just slows that part down. At the same time, because of how vulnerable debt makes artists to the vicissitudes of the economy, debt increases the market's influence on artists' creative choices. In that way, debt exerts a homogenizing force on artistic output. In broad strokes, this mirrors the more popular discussion around entrepreneurship and student debt, which has more or less concluded that debt decreases innovation.

What do you think would happen if artists weren't burdened by the constraints of money?

Just to be clear, we are not advocating that artists are any different from other people or should be entirely unconstrained. Constraints are a part of life, and artmaking would be impossible without them. Money as a medium of exchange is also fine, broadly speaking, but six trillion dollar companies that are more powerful than democratic governments and encourage people to get more and more entwined in debts are not fine. We don't believe artists should be unburdened from the constraints of money. But we do believe that the way artists are positioned without agency in the current economy highlights the struggles faced by many non-artists and other groups as well. As more of our economy is privatized, the rich are soaking up the gains, and 99 percent of us are finding it more difficult to sustain a fulfilling and healthy life while providing for ourselves and our families. For artists, the current economy has made it increasingly difficult to sustain a life and a creative practice at the same time. If artists were not constrained by the burden and encouragement of onerous debts (and also fair rental laws) then we'd see a flourishing of artmaking, a burst of creative energy and much more equality about who can be an artist. And art would not be seen as a privilege of the rich. It would matter more, to more people.