

HYPERALLERGIC

How Art Making Is a Type of Management

The Visible Hand looks at how artists themselves build institutions, are managers, and are very much a part of and influenced by the systems their work moves through.

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Installation view of *The Visible Hand* at CUE Art Foundation, New York (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Lately, I've come to appreciate arts events and exhibitions that have a clear and concise focus. The current show at CUE Art Foundation, *The Visible Hand*, curated by David Borgonjon, is such a show. With only five works by five different artists and collectives included, you have the time and space to take each work in on its own terms and as a whole.

The show looks at the interplay of artists and institutions, but not in the now typical framework of institutional critique, where artists use their medium to dissect and interrogate the institutions in which their work is built and shared. Instead Borgonjon wants to flip the script, as the artists in the show have. *The Visible Hand* looks at how artists themselves build institutions, are managers, and are very much a part of and influenced by the systems their work moves through, whether it be higher education, museums, or the marketplace.

The first work you encounter as you enter is "Mediqi" (2017) by Devin Kenny. An iPad mounted to the wall invites you to navigate a handful of app screens and commission a work of art by choosing things like the medium, the color, and any constraints that limit the size or form that the work can take. At the end you learn that the bid for the commission will go out to either a group of artists, or, if you like and are willing to pay more, to a specific artist. It's like a Mechanical Turk for the art world — an extraordinarily pragmatic approach to art making that mechanizes the entire relationship between the commissioner and artist, relieving both of having to communicate with one another, risking conflict, encountering difference, or coming to understand the realities of each other's living or working conditions. The work is so dry that it comes off as both darkly comic and so believable that you wonder why such a service doesn't already exist. Of course, a quick Google search reveals that it does, in slightly different iterations, from CanvasMatch.com to UGallery, among others.

That teetering between earnest mechanization and bleak humor seems to undergird much of the work on display. From "Mediqi," I moved to the BFAMFAPhD collective's game "Ten Leaps: A Lexicon for Art Education" (2015–ongoing). Gallery-goers encounter the work here as a card game laid out on a table, accompanied by a lengthy rule book. Reading through it you quickly learn that this game represents a series of thought experiments meant to guide students and educators through a set of critical thinking exercises that follow an idealized art making process, from conception to sourcing materials to distribution. At various intervals, the rule book invites artists and students to pull cards from the pile before them that could challenge or support their plans, such as "You lend (license) a partial copyright to someone, controlling how they use it and how long they can use it for." The cards push players to think about the full lifecycle of the hypothetical work they've imagined creating during game-play.

Broken down into discrete and systematic steps, the art making process is rendered as a rational and orderly one that follows a single path. Like *The Game of Life*, real-world situations are compressed and synthesized, and choices, along with random chance, lead to consequences that propel you forward in the game.

“Ten Leaps” pushes players to think about facets of labor and consumption that are easy to sidestep in the real world and are well worth exploring. But there’s also something about its intended situation within higher education that left an odd taste for me, even as I recognized it as useful. Higher education, with the proliferation of arts degrees, has set up the deeply false expectation among students that if you follow a prescribed set of steps you will become an artist. Even though it’s likely completely unintentional, there’s something that feels highly prescriptive about the game, even as it asks players to choose new and intentional paths. It’s part of what made the game feel humorous to me, as someone who has been working in the arts for a number of years now. It’s like the time I invited a few adult friends over to play *The Game of Life* and we decided to make similar choices in the game as we had up to that point in our lives. Let’s just say it got really dark, really quickly.



Partial installation view of Chloë Bass, “The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Six: What is shared, what is offered (Four Phases of Love)” (2016)



Partial installation view of Chloë Bass, “The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Six: What is shared, what is offered (Four Phases of Love)” (2016)

All of which made the counterpoint of Chloë Bass’s “The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Six: What is shared, what is offered (Four Phases of Love)” (2016) the more enjoyable. The work’s story within this context seems achingly clear. A shelf of four spice jars invites you to smell them, and then a series of four prints hangs on the wall, nearby, showing perfect little scoops of the spices arranged on pristine plates. All flavor, no substance. Smell, engage, let your mouth water, look at the abstract beauty of the scoops there on the plates, but you’ll find no nutritional value, and only a bitter herb to taste. It felt pointedly clear — you can follow all the steps, amass the ingredients, but you end with nothing. The work also evokes questions about the racial and ethnic coding of ideas like spice and flavor — the transportation of spices and cultures across continents and oceans, and how these ingredients have been used in a host of different ways across history, from the violent to the commercial.

Bass's work made a nice transition to Jen Liu's evocative painted worlds. There's a sense of a *Metropolis*-like universe in her *Pink Detachment* series, but instead of harsh angles, there are more curves and surfaces that fold or wrap into themselves. The contrast of clean, crisp figures over a mottled watercolor background offers a counter to any sense of cool, dystopic efficiency — there is no moving quickly from point A to point B in this world, instead there are reversals, circling back, trial and error.

Maureen Connor's *Personnel* (1999–ongoing), represented here by video documentation of past installations, felt like the right note to end on. In these projects, she steps into arts institutions around the world and tries to suss out, tinker, and play with the realities of being a worker within them — institutions like the Queens Museum of Art (New York) to the Tapes Foundation (Barcelona) to the Wyspa Art Institute (Gdańsk). Connor's work feels more easily situated within institutional critique than the others, but it's worth noting that Connor herself spends a great deal of time in these institutions. In fact, she is doing what she described to me as an internship at the gallery during the run of the exhibition. Rather than being in opposition to the workers within the institutions she temporarily inhabits, her work expresses an empathy and interest in the often highly irrational working conditions she finds.

Like all the other works, and the show itself, Connor's work is at once earnest, comedic, and tinged with darkness. By looking at individuals within arts organizations, Connor, like the other artists, is ultimately asking who are the people who make and share art. Which quickly leads back to artists themselves, who serve as bosses, manufacturers, and distributors for their work, often doing so in a way that's not so different from the institutions they critique.

The Visible Hand continues at the CUE Art Foundation (137 W 25th St, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 15.