

THE FRANCHISE

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Resolving another boundary between
art & business

Based on the idea of creating its own franchise, **apexart** recently held a worldwide open call for 250-word proposals asking participants why the franchise should come to their town and provide all of the support necessary to produce an exhibition. We then invited over 250 jurors to judge this experiment and, in the end, a proposal from Los Angeles stood out against the 456 others from 65 countries that were submitted. (See other side for exhibition details.)

June 10 – July 2, 2009
at **apexart in New York City**

While the winning exhibition is on view in L.A., **apexart** presents an exhibition that comments on business strategies adopted by the art world and documents the process of the franchise project including a live feed from L.A. in our space in NYC.

Opening reception Wednesday, June 10, 6-8pm

BUILDING THE ART FRANCHISE

In keeping with its topic, this text is being written on an airplane. The plane departed from Berlin, a city that has much to say about the marketing of art in a time of globalization. A good number of galleries from elsewhere in Europe and the United States have opened satellites recently in Germany's reunited capital. These galleries are every bit as refined as their counterparts back home. Dozens of local galleries have also opened, especially in East Berlin, and they look as though they had been airlifted in from London or New York. Once drab and gloomy neighborhoods are dotted with sleek storefronts and courtyard pavilions, all of which speak the same architectural and organizational language. Each one offers a marginally different take on the prevailing gallery paradigm: large windows opening to the street, polished floors, minimalist bookshelves, tastefully exposed vestiges of industrial architecture—not to mention attractive assistants seated at communal desks, gazing into

Apple computers. You may feel you've seen it all before, and you have.

This isn't Berlin's first brush with standardizing the visual-arts experience. The city's legendary art museums were the historic archetypes for today's cultural franchises. Carbon copies of the neo-classical piles on Museum Island popped up after the late nineteen hundreds all over the world, from Budapest to Singapore—emblems of national power and prestige. Thanks in large part to German obsessions about high culture, for about a century or so museums had to look like Greek temples. These days, the art world's field of operations is wider, but the unifying forces are, if anything, more powerful. Local and regional differences are swallowed up in an international system that respects no boundaries. It's a defining irony of the modern age: intense individualization and localism going arm-in-arm with homogenization and shared frames of reference. The larger the art system becomes, the more countries and regions it devours, the more uniform it feels wherever you go.

In today's art world, nomadic artists working in transplantable styles rotate in and out of galleries and museums that are increasingly detached from local concerns and properly belong everywhere and therefore nowhere. Collectors, writers, promoters and hangers-on form a peripatetic herd around the artists. Cultural events that are purposefully designed on a global scale, such as art fairs and biennales, follow an even more rigid template, down to the obligatory VIP cars and goodie bags. Participants parachute in for three days, then the flash crowd disperses, only to reassemble again at another point on the planet. To accommodate this intercontinental fluidity and mobility, standardization is required. The exteriors and interiors of today's arts institutions, their logos and typefaces, their publications and their advertisements, even the look and comportment of their professional staffs, are so strikingly similar as to suggest some kind of central governing authority, ready to crack down on any deviation from the mandated look and feel of 21st-century arts marketing.

The spore-like proliferation of kindred organizations has given rise to a kind of supra-national *museogallerysphere*. Modern branding and design strategies result in art institutions that are recognized and experienced in much the same way

across the globe. Despite the brand-name architecture—or because of it—the venues appear to be made up of the same DNA. Judgments may differ about this uniformity, but its causes are beyond dispute: economic globalization, opening up of closed societies, cheap travel, and rapid innovations in technology and communication. These forces will outlast the current Great Recession. They will continue to recast the parameters and dynamics of contemporary art practice.

The *X, Y, Z and U* show offers a welcome opportunity to reflect on these changes. It is the result of a miniature Petri dish lab experiment in art franchising. The ground rules were simple. **apexart** would mount an exhibition outside its New York base—not unlike how the Guggenheim Museum projects its authority worldwide. Contestants hoping to make their next exhibition an **apexart** production—the franchisees—submitted a 250-word proposal. An elaborate “crowd sourcing” scheme was implemented to rid the selection process of the biases and politics of the typical art jury process. No less than 250 jurors submitted some 7,000 evaluations of 456 proposals from around the world through a computer program that randomly sent jurors anonymous project descriptions.

A proposal from Los Angeles, by The League of Imaginary Scientists—“a group of interdisciplinary thinkers and tinkerers who present ambitious participatory art events with repurposed mechanics and scientific assertions”—emerged as the winner (disclosure: I was a judge). The group sought “affiliation and guidance by **apexart** because A) we do not have the know-how or funds to leap from independent art collective to independent art space, and B) the League was formed on a street called Apex Avenue in Silverlake in 2006.” Thus the first **apexart** franchise exhibition was born.

It bears noting that big-time mainstream franchising doesn't really exist in the art world. Even the Guggenheim, which has so often been compared to a fast food chain, is a far cry from the numbing homogeneity of mass consumer brands. And let's be clear: we have yet to see a truly branded artist, i.e. someone whose production has outlasted their lifetimes, as Dior's

or Versace's did. In the real world, franchising has brought many good things to life and enabled the efflorescence of a vast consumer market that—whatever you may think of the particular strengths or weaknesses of Coca-Cola, Chrysler, Starbucks and their mega-brand peers—feeds, houses, employs, and entertains more people than any socio-economic system in history. In the art world, of course, many forces thought to be productive and reasonably benign are sometimes examined for their perverse and sinister effects. The current **apexart** show stakes out a middle ground. **apexart's** L.A. outpost offers a wry commentary about the franchising impulse, but it is also a successful, albeit allegorical, demonstration of it. It proves that franchising, like anything else, can be done well or done poorly. It is a tool, not a moral stance.

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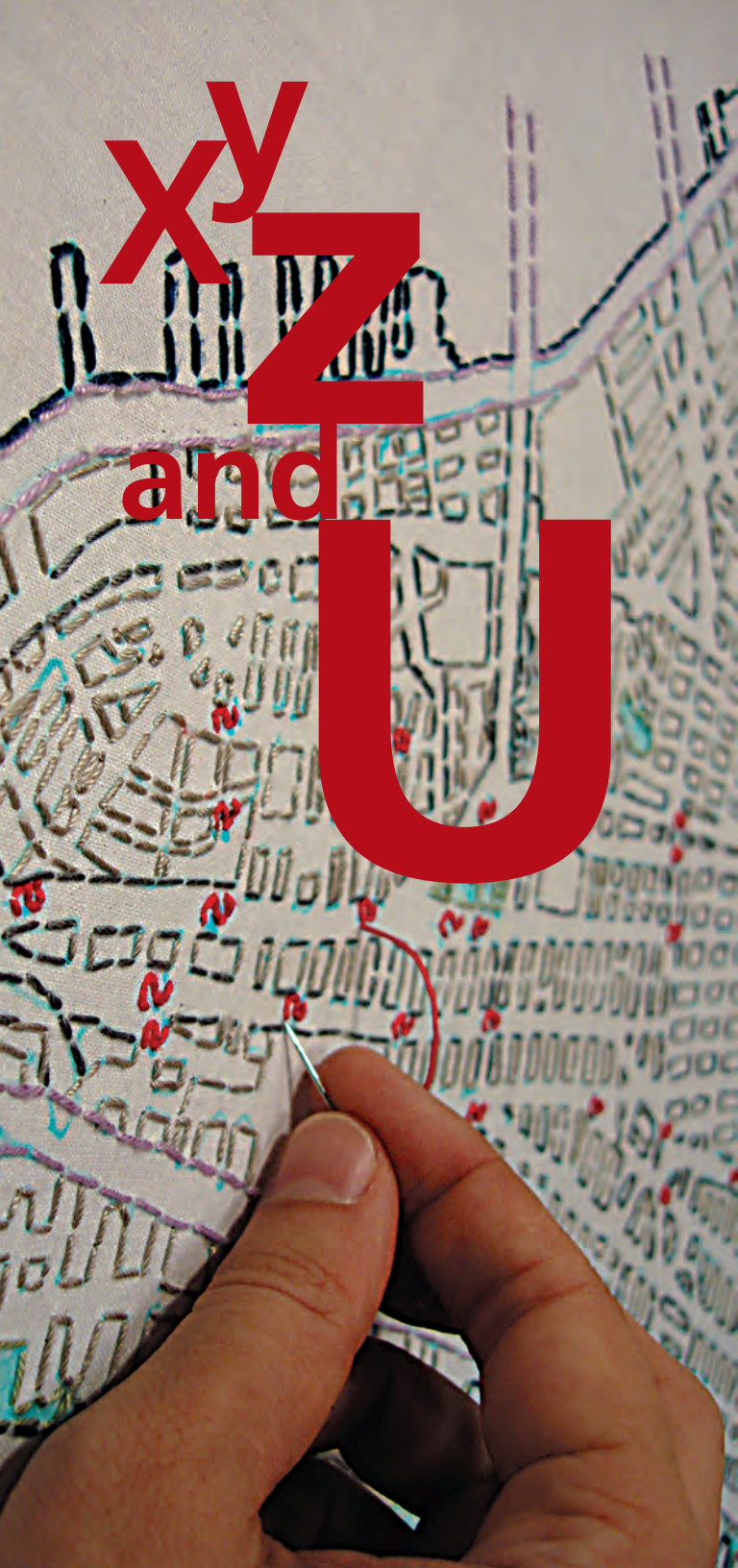
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456 PROPOSALS + 65 COUNTRIES + 250 JURORS + 7000 VOTES = LOS ANGELES

apexart



X,Y, Z and U
Curated by The League of Imaginary Scientists

June 4 – July 3, 2009
at Outpost for Contemporary Art
(6375 N. Figueroa Street, Los Angeles)

Opening reception Thursday, June 4, 6-8pm

The League of Imaginary Scientists is an art collective whose work pairs the creative experimentation of the science lab with free-floating and far-fetched ideas that are decidedly not guided by science. For *X, Y, Z and U*, the League has organized an exhibition with a series of related workshops and interactions by artists and scientists who use creative mapping in their work. *X, Y, Z and U* includes artists and scientists who are not members of the League, but whose practice also marries their creative practice to experimentation.

...an urban neighborhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighborhoods have of it.

from *Mapping the Homunculus*, Steve Dietz (p 200), in reference to Guy Debord's excerpt on sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe

X, Y, Z and U is an exhibition and series of discussions and workshops featuring the mapping projects of artists whose creative practices resemble field research as well as scientists who use DIY tactics and creative visualization to map scientific information. Interactive mapping is tied to the fluxus, situationist and psycho-geography movements. The mapping projects in *X, Y, Z and U* arise from this history of engagement through collective creation and individual experience. The exhibition, hosted

Kelly Jaclynn Andres, *Urban Habitat Lab*, 2008, intervention (M:ST Festival, Canada)



at Outpost for Contemporary Art in Northeast Los Angeles, celebrates individual citizens' experiences of their neighborhood. As participants demarcate their personal paths, listen to the sounds of the trees on their own streets, and scour the area for bacteria, they write a subtext of local knowledge and public interaction—the resulting mappings and their narratives are created by Los Angeles.

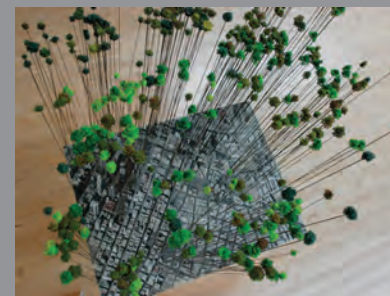
Mapping has emerged in the information age as a means to make the complex accessible, the hidden visible, the unmap-pable mappable...mapping has become a way of making sense of things.

from *Else/Where: Mapping-New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*, edited by Janet Abrams and Peter Hall

X, Y, Z and U includes artists and scientists who construct community-built narratives in collaboration with city trekkers, citizens and their surroundings. Their experiments and interventions break the divide between the sketchbook and scientific inquiry, bending social narrative and creative expression towards research. *X, Y, Z and U* places laypeople and children alongside experts and academics. The framework for interaction is a bike ride, a guided hike, a craft activity, or a street-based science experiment. By means of an audio interface, needlepoint, or a pipette, viewer interaction shapes the artworks.

Kim Abeles, in *Signs of Life*, maps the world through ecological data mining. Through her own urban research, drawing on her experience of the city, she pinpoints the green spots in gray Los Angeles. Her topographical sculpture maps all the trees in the downtown area.

Kim Abeles, *Looking for Paradise (Downtown LA)*, 2004, print of model trees for each actual tree, photo by Ken Marchionno



Kelly Jaclynn Andres drives an *Urban Habitat Lab* into neighborhoods to give street-goers the opportunity to listen to trees. Her construction and use of this solar

and human-powered lab is part of the exhibition. Traveling around Highland Park with the mobile lab, she will connect individuals to the often unheard subtext of the city—the ever-shrinking natural environment.



Jason Bobe & Mackenzie Cowell of DIYbio, *Personal Genome Project's* mobile lab setup (Cambridge)

Mackenzie Cowell and Jason Bobe, of the scientist team DIYbio, use urban environmental data in *BioWeatherMap*, which involves citizen-based DNA collection. Their instructables teach non-scientists how to map the world's biology by collecting DNA samples in local environments, with the resulting collective research disseminated at bioweathermap.org.

Psychogeographer Liz Kueneke compels community members to create maps of their respective urban areas based on what they think about their city, resulting in personal thoughts elevated to the status of statistical science. Her community mapping of Highland Park will take place by citizens during the exhibition.

Andrea Polli and Chuck Varga map urban ecology with *Hello, Weather!* At Outpost for Contemporary Art, they will erect a weather station to connect individuals to their local environments through "sonifications" and live weather data. In an open workshop, Andrea Polli will cull viewer experiences of weather to compile a personal almanac.

How many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meanings and contents? It is doubtful whether a finite number can ever be given in answer to this sort of question. What we are most likely confronted with here is a sort of instant infinity.

Henri Lefebvre, from *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*



Andrea Polli & Chuck Varga, *Hello, Weather!*, public weather station and intervention (Eyebeam, NY)

merely propelled by curiosity; they are compelled to connect.

As part of the exhibition connecting Outpost for Contemporary Art in Los Angeles to **apexart** in New York, the League of Imaginary Scientists and **apexart** will create a U coordinate wall, where on-site and online participants can engage in mapping. Individuals' engagements and contributions effectively build participatory artworks and perform cooperative science experiments. U is essential. <http://www.imaginaryscience.org/xyzu>

—The League of Imaginary Scientists



The League of Imaginary Scientists with repurposed physics apparatus (Union College's Mandeville Gallery)

www.apexart.org/exhibitions/franchise.htm

cover: Liz Kueneke, *Manhattan's Urban Fabric*, 2008, participatory mapping

KIM ABELES, KELLY JACLYNN ANDRES, JASON BOBE, MACKENZIE COWELL, LIZ KUENEKE, ANDREA POLLI, CHUCK VARGA