

Cornelia Sollfrank: *Unlimited liability* is a pretty unusual name for a shop. It sounds like a business term—what does it mean exactly?

Michel Chevalier: It's a sabotaged business term. Limited Liability (Ltd.) is the British term for what Americans call a corporation. Thom Hartmann recently published an interesting study, *Unequal Protection*, where he demonstrates how the alleged rights of corporations, established in the nineteenth century, are based on a false interpretation of a Supreme Court decision.² Democratic process has been undermined as a result, with corporations often having more rights than people. One of these special rights is limited liability. If you or I poison someone by neglect, we face a jail sentence. If it's a corporation, the individual owners cannot be charged criminally. The corporate entity may be sued, but its individual actors are shielded from liability. This insidious phenomenon explains much of corporate misdoing today. I inverted the term in this project, with *unlimited liability* referring to a fine people with over €50,000 in assets *do* face if they try to purchase something in my

shop, which sells multiples from close to seventy artists, filmmakers, and collectives, and eight publishing houses and record labels.

CS: Could you describe your neighborhood, and your project's relationship to it?

MC: The shop is located in Münzviertel, where I've lived for ten years now. Most of this low-income neighborhood of Hamburg was bombed by the British in WWII—only a few old buildings have survived. The city later zoned it commercially. Although it's very central, only about 800 people live here. There are many offices as well as a "fix-in" center for heroin addicts and a homeless shelter. The main immigration office also used to be here... so this area is not really glamorous. On the other hand, we are extremely central, about 200 yards from the Kunstverein in Hamburg and the Deichtorhallen Art Complex.

CS: ...which are part of the Kunstmeile [art mile].

MC: Yes, the belly of the beast. But this gives the shop a strategic location.

CS: Could you describe this place?

MC: One of the best comments was by some men, from Romania, I think. They stepped in, looked a tad confused, and asked, "This place is being renovated, *right*? When are you going to open?" I told them, "No, it's not being renovated, it's operating as it is." They were a little astonished. The place looks badly damaged because there was a flood here in 2004. It subsequently remained unoccupied and hasn't been renovated. There is mildew all over the walls and psychedelic 1960s wallpaper everywhere.

CS: Would you call your shop an outlet for multiples?

MC: Yes, that's one of my rules. I didn't want any limited editions or signed works. Some signed works may still have crept in despite my policy.

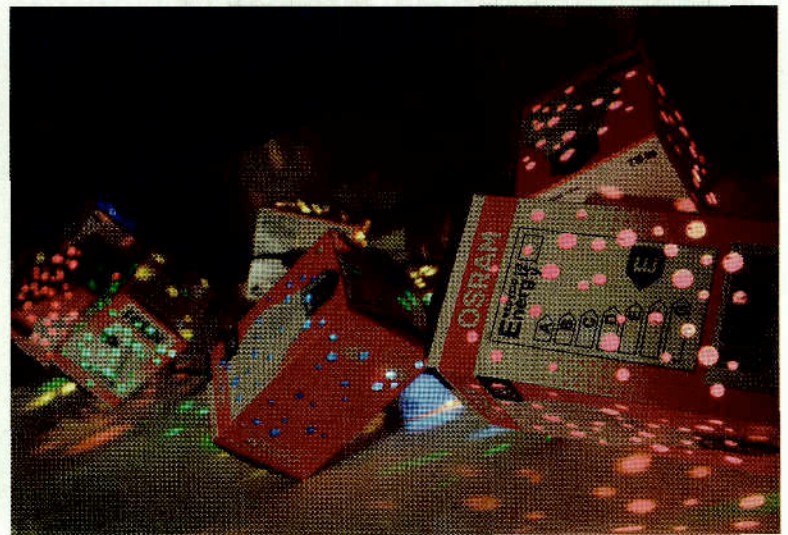
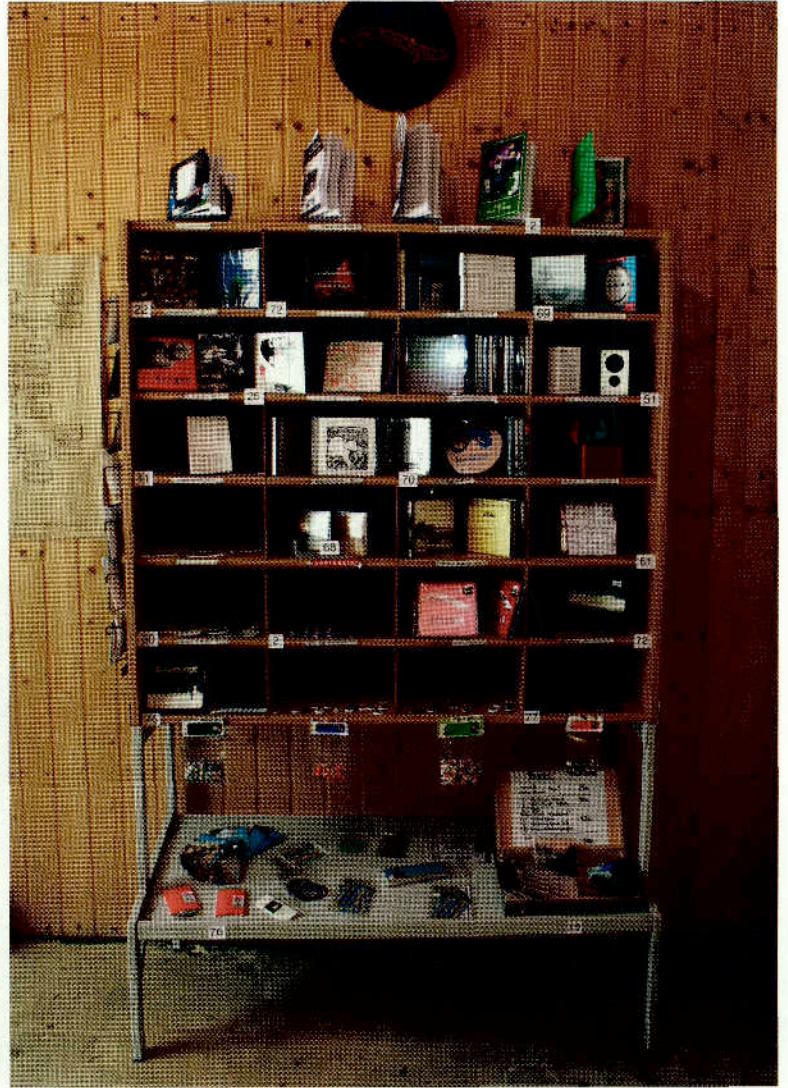
Another strict rule has caused some debate: I excluded painting and drawing, media that, very present in the art market, have made a big comeback in recent years. I wanted to play devil's advocate, in a way.

UNLIMITED LIABILITY

AN ART SHOP THAT WON'T SELL TO THE RICH

CORNELIA SOLLFRANK
IN CONVERSATION WITH

MICHEL CHEVALIER



Many museums do big painting exhibitions using a pseudo-populist argument that goes something like this, "We receive public funding and painting is what the common folk want (because they don't understand this concept stuff)." This is a grotesque argument. In fact, it's the privileged members of the upper classes who want this supposedly more sensual production, and who need to sustain a genius cult. A number of myths are necessary to consolidate this class' social domination: natural talent and taste, carefree audacity—as Pierre Bourdieu showed in *Distinction*.³

By contrast, the picture that emerged out of Lucy Lippard's chronicle of conceptual art, *Six Years*,⁴ is of conceptual art as a middle-class phenomenon that opened the way for protagonists with less inherited cultural capital, people for whom, to paraphrase Bourdieu, culture has not become nature through a process of early-childhood incorporation. There was a real emancipatory thrust in this do-it-yourself, instruction-manual aesthetic. This book influenced me a lot.

CS: What does this have to do with buying conditions?

MC: The selection of things for sale and the buying conditions constitute an experiment. Can conceptual art's emancipatory dimension be reactivated? Does it have any meaning today? It matters little if people lay weight on—or are conscious of—the fact that they are buying art, that some of these producers are known. It's enough when they are simply interested in these odd things.

CS: You select all the works, right?

MC: No, I select the artists. This is not a "this work by so-and-so, next to this work by..." curated exhibition. I invited people who responded with propositions. Several things were created especially for *unlimited liability*.

CS: How about the prices?

MC: Very important question. Everything is less than €30. It would make no sense—or be just another boring Kippenbergeresque

prank—to exclude people with assets while selling expensive stuff. Four items are free. About one third is in the 50 cent to €5 price range—all of our buttons, stickers, half of our CDs, all the postcards, several publications, even some of our DVDs.

CS: Your exclusion of the wealthy is the opposite of what happens in the art world, which is based on rich people...

MC: ...but seldom admitted as such.

CS: Why shouldn't rich people spend their money on these works if they'd like to? Wouldn't that be good for the artists?

MC: Well, rich people have plenty of opportunities to spend money on art. I wanted to create a context where artists would face the challenge of selling their works without falling into a structural dependency on society's apex. As far as the exclusion of collectors goes, the goal is not to penalize people with a certain lifestyle. Of course €50,000 is not so much. If you own an apartment, or inherited money from your grandma, you can't buy anything here. Yet, no one who is borderline-over-the-limit has yet made any negative comments. I'm trying to isolate and disable, within the dominant social fractions, those who control the tap. And to bring to light this ugly little fact that is seldom thematized in art schools: galleries' sought-after buyers are also the people who are orchestrating neoliberal policy. Collectors use these artifacts of putative self-determination, these artworks, as a source of legitimacy, flattering themselves that they are as with-it and spontaneous as the artists—the other function of art-market-commodities is, of course, investment. At the same time, these millionaires block collective self-determination on political and economic levels. Quantitative and qualitative research confirms that the people who buy art, the top two percent of the population, also overwhelmingly vote for and fund conservative and neoliberal parties.

CS: How can you make sure that rich people don't buy in your shop? How could you prevent this if, say, a collector disguised him-

self as a down-and-out person, or sent an assistant?

MC: Buyers have to sign a contract and show me an ID so I can verify their identity. This contract makes them liable to a €1000 fine in the event that they violate its terms. They also have to return the artwork. That's the risk they face. And I can imagine, the publicity, too.

CS: What reactions have you had from buyers? On the one hand, there are some pretty inexpensive objects. On the other, there's the bureaucracy. If I want a sticker for €2, I have to sign a contract. I can't imagine people are pleased with this.

MC: True, it's rather bureaucratic. Still, I haven't had many negative incidents. People have not complained about the waste of time... I had one person who, as it so happens, is also an artist who has written for establishment magazines like *Texte zur Kunst*. This person got really angry, stating that my reliance on the contract was naive in its use of bourgeois institutions and that it betrayed a police-state mentality. Most are actually pretty happy to do it when they know why. Many artists are selling works very inexpensively here. They tell me, "this is much lower than my usual price." As such, it's crucial for me to respond to their trust, and to institute a firewall so that these works will not become investment objects for collectors. Filling out the contract is also an opportunity to engage in a discussion. This performative, ritual dimension allows us to step out of free-market-economic practice.

CS: What happens when a neighborhood resident comes in and, unaware of the art context, simply wants to buy a glass of "(theory-)jam" or some stickers? What happens when they find out they have to sign this contract? Do you explain the project?

MC: Yes, of course. This sign right over my head explains the store's conditions. It's astonishing how people go along with it. I guess it may be entertaining to have me explain this to them. Obviously, if you're in a

rush this will be a headache, but most people who come here spend a long time anyway, looking at all the material. We are off the beaten track, so they want to spend time seeing the project. As for locals, it's true that some students say, "very interesting, I'll come back later."

CS: Do you see this as a functioning shop, or is this more of a metaphor? Last year, while unlimited liability first ran, *Drei Geschäfte [Three Shops]* was on view at the Kunstverein in Hamburg.⁵

MC: That's a very interesting question. In a way, this project is a response to that Kunstverein program. Culture and Social Movements Archive, a group of which I'm a member, was actually invited in December 2005 to participate in *Three Shops*.

This was in the wake of a controversy that pitted a group of gallerists and collectors against a group of artists elected to the new Kunstverein board of directors. The gallerists and collectors contingent did not want to accept the momentous shift that would certainly be brought about by these artists, who were known for their criticism of the Kunstverein's hermetic and market-oriented curatorial orientation. And so, the first group actively campaigned to declare the results of the election invalid.⁶

CS: Would you say that the Kunstverein's *Three Shops* tried to misappropriate the little shops they had invited in order to demonstrate its proximity to small, self-organized projects while structurally supporting, or being supported by, people who represent exactly the opposite?

MC: As you note, there is a considerable dissymmetry between the status and budget of the Kunstverein and the shops they graciously featured on the ground floor. The curatorial line was "let's have a look at other economies, and see how they are different from the art(market)-economy." This is but another example of the art market's two-front strategy: move those goods, but keep the cutting-edge flank covered.

Still, I wouldn't go so far as to say it was a misappropriation: the shops willingly took up

the invitation, and had freedom to use the space as they wanted, with a not-inconsiderable budget. In January 2006, we at the Culture and Social Movement Archive made a take-it-or-leave-it proposal to reflect the recent social movement within the Kunstverein. This cooled the director off. Thankfully for him, Berlin's progressive books went along with the charade, sparing him any of the "critical reflection" the bookshop advertises on its website.

CS: Coming back to artists running shops, how real is this idea? Or is the shop a symbolic form?

MC: It is not economically viable as a unit, obviously. So, to a certain extent, you could say that it is an exhibition. I also see it as a form of art mediation, or an art-political campaign. It gets artists a chance to get their feet wet and to sell things, and I am doing my best to get people to buy things, to create an affective relationship between artists and other groups, other people. This involves more than just a sale. The shop is premised on the hope that, by respectfully arousing people's curiosity and hopefully emboldening them, more will be empowered to show their numbers and raise their voices when cultural policy is being debated.

CS: You are not just selling things, but also organizing small events. Could you explain their nature and role for the shop?

MC: The events are an attempt to use the space intelligently, to draw people in. The shop project involves various sub-groups. I have publishers, people who are in bands, people interested in cultural politics and urbanism. By customizing events around these poles of interest, I draw people in and keep them coming. Since the shop only lasts two to three months, it's difficult to get word-of-mouth to spread. I am doing a constant information campaign.

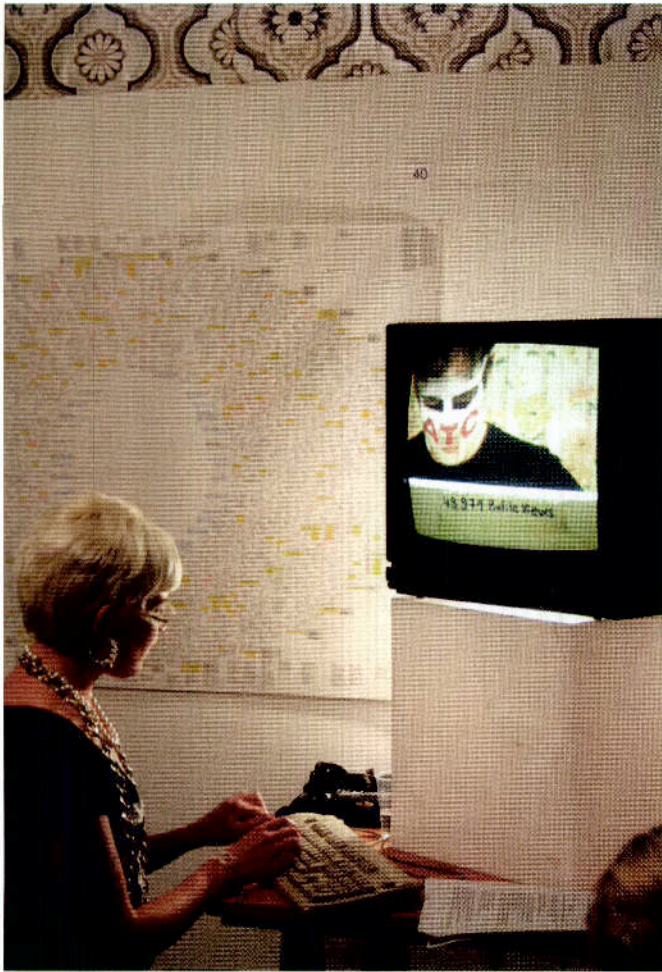
There are precedents for this kind of project: *Fashion Moda* in New York, and *The Times Square Show*, where goods were exhibited/sold for an average price of \$5. These projects happened in the late-seventies and early-eighties in New York. Today, when you

look at the fate of institutional critique, you realize that this is a forgotten—or rather, erased—period. Taking Transform's *Do You Remember Institutional Critique?* issue as a case in point,⁷ you see that this period is totally ignored. Both theorists and art historians fetishize the much more academically-fashionable late sixties/early-seventies, skipping over an entire decade-and-a-half to then pick up in the nineties. In a way I'm also trying to renew and reactivate approaches that are underappreciated today in consecrated art-theoretical discourse.

NOTES

1. This conversation took place at Michel Chevalier's shop in Hamburg on July 21, 2007.
2. Thom Hartmann, *Unequal Protection: The Rise of Corporate Dominance and the Theft of Human Rights*, Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2002.
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
4. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
5. <http://www.kunstverein.de/kv/menu.php?cat=3>, accessed August 10, 2007.
6. See Michel Chevalier, Cornelia Sollfrank, Nana Petzet, Frank Stühlmeyer, Claudia Reiche, and Rahel Puffert, "Praktizierte Kritik an der Institution. Der Fall Kunstverein in Hamburg," *Kulturrisse* 5, 2006, 62, online at: <http://igkultur.at/igkultur/kulturrisse/1143541391/1143566427>, accessed August 10, 2007.
7. <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106>, accessed August 10, 2007.

Cornelia Sollfrank is an artist and activist living in Hamburg, Germany. Since the mid 1990s, she has been investigating worldwide communication networks and deploying the subversive artistic strategies of the classical avant-gardes—that is, new models of authorship, appropriation, and the deconstruction of genius and originality myths—into digital media. Of late, this has led her to make artistic contributions to the discourse on copyright and intellectual property.





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