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Don't pay as you go: New York store gives away goods for free

Ed Pilkington in New York

The Guardian, London, Monday 16 March 2009



A garment on offer at the Free Store in Manhattan, run by artists Athena Robles and Anna Stein. Shoppers are asked to only take what they need. Photograph: Frederic Lafargue/Rapport

In recent months downtown Manhattan has spawned a new pastime - you might call it disaster tourism. Every day thousands of people throng its narrow streets, attracted to Ground Zero rising slowly out of the ashes of 9/11.

This week, though, visitors expecting to experience terrorist and economic

catastrophe at close range have been amazed to stumble on something far more positive, even joyful, just around the corner.

It is a shop front in Nassau Street, a couple of blocks away from Wall Street, that would be utterly forgettable were it not for the two words stamped across its glass: Free Store.

In the age of postmodern advertising, slogans like "free store" usually mean the opposite - they are probably being used to market hyper-exclusive shops selling nothing under \$1,000. But in this case free store is precisely what it says.

Every item on offer inside the small shop is free. Anyone off the street can browse through its goods, select an item, and if they think they need it, walk out with it utterly without charge.

Last week it traded a variety of goods, from kids dresses and art supplies, to DVDs, posters, postcards and a dauntingly large stained-glass ceiling fitting.

The shop is the creation of two artists, Athena Robles and Anna Stein, who have launched it with the help of a \$9,000 grant from a local cultural body and the September 11 fund. They began planning it 18 months ago but believe the timing of its opening now is singularly appropriate. "It's a certain time in history in this country when people really need to help each other out."

Within five minutes of the store opening its doors on Friday, it was packed to overflowing with "shoppers" browsing through its T-shirts, woolly scarves, baskets and pair of black riding boots. Robles and Stein explained that they were welcome to take whatever they liked, with the only proviso being that they felt they "needed it". Each transaction was noted in their records and the customer

given a receipt as they would be in any money-based shop.

Richard, a travel agent who works in Wall Street, chose a large framed photograph of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. "It's a great time to be cheering people up with gifts, and why not?" he said. "We've bailed out the car companies, we've bailed out the banks, so it's nice to get something back for once."

Kevin walked away with a free copy of a book called *Great Sex Trips*. So why did he feel he needed a book with a title like that? "Why not? There's always something to be learned."

Robles and Stein based their idea for the shop on a splattering of free stores that cropped up in San Francisco and New York in 1967. They were set up by the hippy group the Diggers, themselves named after the 17th century English agrarian utopians of the same name.

In San Francisco, the Diggers set up two shops in the Haight-Ashbury district called *Free Frame of Reference* and *Trip Without A Ticket*. There, returning Vietnam veterans would exchange their uniforms for tie-dye clothes and feed themselves on vegetable soup known as *Digger Stew*. The Diggers went so far as to set up free hospitals for those who did not have insurance, not to mention free concerts with bands such as the Grateful Dead.

Stein and Robles don't claim to have as expansive ambitions as the 1960s Diggers, and their project leans more towards the artistic, where the Diggers were political and rebellious.

But they do plan to keep the store open until the end of March, replenishing the

free items with donations from people who use the shop.

"When we started I was terrified we would run out of stuff," Robles said. "But after two days that's no longer a worry people are bringing in bagfuls of lovely things."

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