Would you like to participate in an artistic experience? This question is the title of Ricardo Basbaum’s signature project, which will be hosted by the Logan Center Gallery as the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts is officially launched to the public, and will remain on view through November 25, 2012. However generous it may sound, it demands a lot in return. On one level, Basbaum’s query is in the form of a radically open artwork if it is to have great inspiration in asserting an inquisitive tone that will (hopefully) sustain the Center’s exhibitions program in the years to come. To put it otherwise, I always wanted to mark this occasion with a big bold question in the form of an artwork.

Yet on another level, we are opening a can of worms. The artwork in question, as a question, has at its heart a somewhat descriptively simple, painted metal object. It measures 125 × 80 × 18 cm or approximately 49 × 31 × 7 in and is heavier than it appears in pictures, including the reproduce here. The NBP object, as it is called, derives its shapes from a sign (painted on the reverse of this page) that Basbaum designed in 1990, in search of what he calls “New Bases for Personality” (NBP).

Here is how he describes the decision to introduce the NBP: “[In 1990, I redressed all my work to a simple drawing, which was conceived of as an easily memorizable particle, and I developed this (in the form of objects, diagrams, installations and drawings) as a vehicle or a sort of virus, for circulating in your body (therefore, pointing directly toward the reader or viewer)—the adopted artistic methodology suggested the use of cartesian geometry, together with the repetition of visual refrain].”

If, in the strange blue-stirred object and the accompanying question, “Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?”, you see the suspensive deduction of a pill-pusher (when I first encountered them, I could not help but think of the blue pill chosen by Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, in the Wachowski brothers’ 1999 film The Matrix, before entering the all-encompassing matrix), it may be because the world of contemporary art is suffering something of a virtual hang-over from debating the merits of participation, inactivity, and relational aesthetics. Yet, if taking the pill, i.e. choosing to participate, will not make the headlines go away, it may afford a chance to grasp more concretely the workings of our networks.

Since its creation in 1994, the NBP object has been offered to those who express the desire to participate and they may do with it as they see fit. By now, the project spans 18 years and over 60 cities on four continents. While one NBP object circulates throughout Chicago, the Logan Center Gallery becomes an interface with the fuller span of Basbaum’s project via evolving wall diagrams, video documentation of past experiences, new documentation of current experiences, and a version of the artist’s modular painted metal structure that—in configuration—echoes the space of the NBP object itself. (The installation could be approached at the physical condition of an immaterial space created to track the project, namely the website http://www.lognbuprojects.com.) When Ricardo Basbaum visits Chicago in November 2012, we will think through this system of signs, subjects and objects by developing a Collective Conversation—one of the artist’s newest modes of workshop/performance that emphasize the process of composing a polyphonic exchange.

This social space is characterized in part by the erosion of clear lines of opposition. One finds that one’s desires (individual, a sense of autonomy as well as connection to the rest of the world) can be used rhetorically to package and pad softer forms of domination and dependence. Twenty years later, we can speak of a complex condition wherein [creative industries] produce “experience economies” that attempt to make us, the “post-everything” subjects, feel like we are still participating in the decisions that structure our lives. All the while, men and women may be attempting to track our desires so they can be sold back to us, no longer as good old commodities, but as our own personalities, which we struggle to grasp amid bombardments by ever-more sophisticated infomercials.

Basbaum’s ever expansive and embodied critical project raises echoes of Oswald de Andrade’s (1890–1934) Anthropophagist Manifesto (1928) and the philosophy of Gils de Oliveira (1925–1995) and Felix Guattari (1930–1992), whose Capitalism and Schizophrenia 1 and II (1972 and 1977) may be positioned as the obligate continuation of the Brazilian poet’s polemics of ingesting and digesting the other, of incorporating the very object of critique. In Andrade’s time, this concerned the change of barbarism and indeed cannibalism from Europe to the colonies; in Deleuze and Guattari’s time, it was the colonization of desire by capitalism. In Basbaum’s time, it has been the phantoms of liberty and participation in a globally connected socio-economic sphere.

The questions only multiply: Can one quell the fear of the other by injecting (rather than resisting) Yourself, elemental? Is the NBP just such a UDO? What new personalities can it help to invent? Will they, in the end, still distinguish us from you? How would you like to participate in an artistic experience? —Michele Varisco, Visual Arts Program Curator, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts