

An Economy We Want to Occupy

At a time when so many are so clear that the current system is not working—what might? Is it already happening?

By Laura Flanders

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Plans are afoot for a grand reawakening at Occupy Wall Street and with that comes a return to the main project. While confrontations with police have grabbed the media's eye (there was another big police bust-up this weekend), for many, the encampments have always been as much about possibility as they are about protest.

In that spirit, and in the spirit of the conversation begun here last month about a possible worker co-op at the old Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago, I'm posting the transcript of an interview I conducted last November with members of what was then a loosely defined group at Occupy Wall St who were studying "solidarity economics."

In part two of this interview, you'll hear from Mike Johnson of Solidarity NYC, who's been deeply involved in cooperative live and work projects in the city since the 1970s. Part one features Jen Abrams and Caroline Woolard, co-founders of OurGoods.org, in a conversation about value, markets and surviving the money economy.

I want to hear from you. Post your comments and tales of alternative models you have been part of in the comments section below and keep your e-mails coming.

At a time when so many are so clear that the current system is not working—what might? Is it already happening? There's more information about OurGoods.org at their website and you don't have to be officially ordained as an "artist" to join it.

Let's start with some introductions:

I'm Jen Abrams, I'm a choreographer and a co-founder of OurGoods .org. We are a barter network for creative people...

Which means what, exactly?

Caroline Woolard: Our Goods is a barter network for creative people that connects artists and designers and craftspeople and activists with each other so they can trade skills and spaces to get independent projects done.

What gave rise to OurGoods?

CW: We are all artists and designers as cofounders, and we've experienced forever that there's no clear market value for what we do. Still, we want to continue to do it. We're motivated by something other than profit. What we do feels valuable to us as a community, so we've always gotten things done by trading with other people whose projects we value. That reciprocal exchange feels satisfying; it also helps to get the project done, and we thought—why not make a larger network so more of us can connect across disciplines?

JA: Put another way, the market value (within the capitalist valuation system) for what we do is very low, but the market value for what we do within our circles, within the circles of people who appreciate art, is very different...

CW: it's an alternative market.

How do you demonstrate value?

JA: In my case, people come see the work and most times they'll have a lot to say afterwards, about their experience. They'll have had thoughts, their own sense of their humanity, their connection to others may have changed; their perceptions may have been shifted in a particular way. All those are innate goods in the human experience, yet they are externalities in the capitalist market system. They are things that must happen for us to be fully human, but there isn't a money market for these experiences. So [our question was] how can we create other kinds of valuation systems that support those things happening?

But many people would say there is a functioning market system for art. Some painters, designers and dance companies are super-successful in the money market system.

JA: I'm not saying there is no way to value any art in market system. I'm saying that the majority of what gets done in the creative sphere does not fit well within the capitalist system.

CW: Another way of looking at it is capitalism is founded on a model of scarcity, and creative work happens in abundance. Everyone is creative. When there is a scarce amount of dollars out there, there will never be enough money for everyone, so in order to meet our needs as creative people and as humans, if you work in a mutual aid model, where everyone helps one another, then the question of value is more about how to support one another than self-interested accumulation.

How does OurGoods.org work, exactly. Say I arrive on your site, then what?

CW: You log in, make a profile, and you list your needs and what you have, and what sort of projects you're involved in. Then, people can search for what they need and find people who can fill those needs, as well as what projects they might have that you could help with. When two people have found a potentially good match, they have a conversation, and decide between them how to rate the exchange of labor.

JA: There's so much value that comes from that conversation. First of all, the fact that we're asking people to have a conversation about value is disruptive and valuable. You can tell it's disruptive because people are confused by it. They don't instinctively know how to have that conversation. It's a skill we don't have but one we need to nurture.

There are all sorts of possible metrics of exchange. One metric is hour per hour: right now I'm receiving an hour of yoga lessons in exchange for an hour of business plan consulting.... Other exchanges are less obvious: an object for a skill, say, or exchanges that involve people with more or less experience. Sometimes it makes sense to use money value—how much am I paid for what I do/how much are you paid—but without the money.

CW: What's important is there is no answer. There's no clear way to value people's labor. It's subjective and that's the main thing. We step back and say as long as the framework is mutual respect, then the conversation can come out any way. There's no right way in particular.

What constitutes a successful outcome. Want to share an OurGoods success story?

JA: In the case of an artist I admire, I may just want to help him—and that's my end of the exchange. I get the experience. He gets the help. We're asking people to engage with each other and with uncertainty and see how it changes their lives.

The fact that we're having these conversations at all is a successful outcome. A lot of projects are getting done, some shifts are happening in people's creative process, and then there are people who've gotten very practical things exchanged: video shooting in exchange for a website for a documentary maker, etc.

Gaia [an online think tank soliciting 'third world' ideas for "first world" development] needed translators, but through the barter process, he ended up with collaborators who helped him spread his project to new countries.

It doesn't have to be transactional, it can blur towards collaboration, gift giving or sharing. The bottom line is mutual aid, not self-interest.

JA: we're not trying to say that people don't have self interest. They do, but there are other motivations too, and we see them in action all the time, every day. This isn't some story we're making up in our minds or wishing to be true—we see it. When you offer a tool for people to offer assistance and surface those other motivations... Wikipedia is one obvious example, but ours is a real [not virtual] interaction.

Has OurGoods changed you?

JA: I've changed everything. My life had been all about navigating scarcity.

But how do you survive, make a living, pay your bills?

JA: How do I survive is very different from how do I get money.

I survive because I'm part of WOW [a thirty-year-old women's theater collective in the East Village in New York]. If I weren't in community I would kill myself.

How do I get money? [Before OurGoods] I was working at small non-profits as an administrator. The groups I worked for operated on a shoestring, with never enough money to do what they needed to do, and I was deeply entrenched in poverty. Health insurance was eating up 20–25 percent of my income. Now I have it through my partner who works for Time Warner/AOL. How do I pay bills now? I've reduced my expenses through exchange, a grant supports me at OurGoods.org and my partner has a middle class job.

But you said everything had changed. The material conditions of your life don't seem to have changed much.

JA: My life has changed because if I want something I don't have the money to buy, I have a way of getting it without money. But it's really as an artist that the change is most profound. I've completely changed the way I work.

I used to make only the work that would fit within the very limited resources available. I couldn't make work bigger than space that WOW provided. I couldn't make work that called for skills that people at WOW weren't able to offer. I could only work when WOW was open.

Our Goods has busted all that open. My network is now ten times larger and includes people from very different backgrounds with very different perspectives and very different skills, and instead of being a sole creator I'm involved in all these huge collaborative pieces. My mindset has completely changed.

I'm now very exploratory because I'm not worrying about what kind of work I can make given the constraints that I have. (And my constraints at WOW were much less than what most artists are dealing with: they're mostly dealing what can I make in my living room. What can I do with the \$50 I have left over from my day job at the end of the week?)

The project I'm making now is massive in scale, with at least five other generative artists working on it—and that's just not a way that I could work before.

How long has OurGoods been around and was there a particular trigger for its beginning?

CW: The economic crisis led to a personal crisis...

JA: I'd been working on being presented at a particular venue for five years—and in 2008 they were finally interested in presenting me. And then the bottom fell out of market and the venue backed off my project. I thought, damn, I'm back to self-producing and everyone is back to self-producing—how is this going to work?

How old are you?

CW: I'm 27.

JA: I'm 40.

Caroline—your story?

CW: For years, I'd done everything I could to stay out of the money economy because I find it makes me really depressed to work a job that doesn't value my whole self. So I've done everything I can to reduce my needs, reduce my expenses, cut my rent.

I've done all sorts of things to not have rent be my main expense. I lived in backyard sheds that I retrofitted in Greepoint.... Then I started living with a bunch of artists and built out a huge studio space. In 2008 we signed a five-year lease and made a commitment to each other, the place, New York, and just at that moment, I realized

we could do things on a scale together that were impossible for me alone in a little shack trying to do all these small things. In the middle of the economic crash, we can buy our food in bulk and it's really inexpensive.

For money, I was working at Cooper Union as a studio technician in the night shift. It gave me some benefits and paid pretty well, but slowly OurGoods has been able to pay me more out of grants, and most importantly— everything through the exchange is lower, and rent is cheaper because of the collective living space.

I'm now working for OurGoods more or less full time and I'm teaching a class on barter at the New School—and they pay me for it. [Jen points out that nonetheless, Caroline doesn't have health insurance.] That's right, but still, it's a very strange turn-around.

What happened?

CW: Ever since running a studio space with a group and trying to be transparent and explain why some people pay more rent than others based on how much labor they put in to it, I've been wracking my brain about the ethics of payment and what could be fair, given our current reality. In the studio and at OurGoods, the question became: *How do we figure out what's fair?*

I was trying to learn about alternative systems that exists—and that led me to solidarity NYC and I started getting really excited about the idea that there are lots of people who meet their needs and have livelihoods that are completely outside of the economic system, or have the economic money mapped onto them, but the abundance of the economy they exist in is huge in contrast to that system and not clearly related to it. That led me to Solidarity NYC and a whole circle of people who value each other not the individual scarcity/accumulation thing.

In part two: Meet Mike Johnson, SolidarityNYC and find out what Occupy has to do with any of this.

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