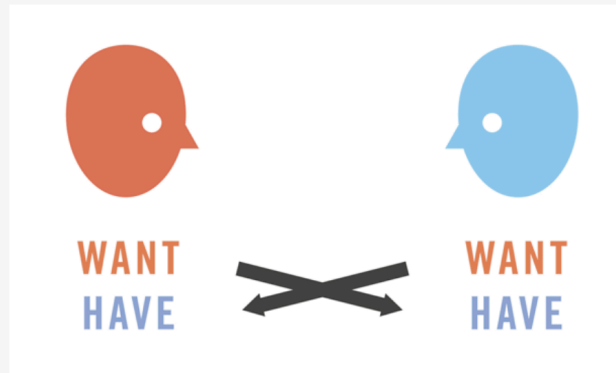


# Interview with Caroline Woolard of OurGoods

By [Jenny Jaskey](#)  
Jan 20, 2010



*Over the next four weeks, I will post a series of interviews with artists and organizers who are exploring new models for the relationship between art production and economy. Groupwork, non-competition, bartering, and sustainability are a few of the catchwords that surface when speaking about these community-based efforts. As a primer to these conversations, I highly recommend the new publication "Art Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor, and Politics" produced by Temporary Services of Chicago. An online version of this collection of writings by scholars, critics, and artists is available online at <http://www.artandwork.us>. - Jenny Jaskey*

I first learned of [OurGoods](#) from an advertisement in "Art Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor, and Politics." Intrigued by their claim to provide an online infrastructure for artists to obtain goods and services without cash, I wrote to Caroline Woolard, a co-founder of the OurGoods project, to find out more. For those in the New York area, OurGoods will host "[Trade School](#)" in a storefront at 139 Norfolk Street in the Lower East Side from January 25th through March 1st.

## What is OurGoods?

**Caroline:** OurGoods is an online barter network for artists, designers, and cultural producers to barter skills, spaces, and objects. Members of OurGoods organize creative projects with "haves" and "needs" and OurGoods matches barter partners, tracks

projects with "haves" and "needs" and OurGoods matches barter partners, tracks accountability, and helps the business of independent, creative work. The site can be used to find collaborators, see emerging interests, or execute projects without cash. For example, I can help you write a grant if you make my costumes. OurGoods is a new model for valuing creative work. It fosters interdependence and strong working relationships. You will get your independent work done with mutual respect instead of cash.

### What motivated you to get started?

**Caroline:** At one point, I wondered: Why can't I get my favorite band to play in my studio? Is cash the only way to pay for a labor of love? I didn't know the band members personally, but hoped we'd have a mutual understanding of the passion and respect that motivates labor. I wanted to work hard for them because I love their work. I want to support them directly, with my labor of love. We decided that they'd play if I gave the lead singer one of my [Work Dresses](#) and the guitarist a day of spackling and sanding help in his studio.

Creative thinker-makers often work for free, expanding the public imagination while trafficking in a murky labor-value exchange. Rather than complain about limited funding and access to resources, OurGoods shows that we already have a lot as a creative community. What happens if we have the agency to decide what our objects and skills are worth? Let's find out.

The OurGoods community offers more than cash funding offers artists. It helps us honor and value our work. It draws the creative community together into mutually supportive relationships. It is a locus of generosity and a hub of collaboration. OurGoods makes passion productive. It replaces the zero-sum funding game with a game of "the more you get, the more I get."



Display of "Work Dress" - an item up for barter through OurGoods - in Providence Art Windows

**Who is behind the project?**

**Caroline:** The group behind OurGoods is: Jen Abrams, Louise Ma, Carl Tashian, Rich Watts, and Caroline Woolard. OurGoods will work because our computer programmer, Carl Tashian, was the senior site engineer at Zip Car for the first five years, answering phone calls in bed until the site made resource sharing ubiquitous; because the person cultivating support for OurGoods (Jen Abrams) has self-produced shows in a collectively run, sweat-equity theater space for a decade; because two of the best designers in NYC (Rich Watts and Louise Ma) have donated hundreds of hours to user interface design and architecture; and because I won't stop until OurGoods is great.

**How is OurGoods funded? Do you utilize the bartering system to fund the site itself?**

**Caroline:** OurGoods received \$15,000 through The Field's Economic Revitalization for Performing Artists grant and \$1,500 from the Brooklyn Arts Council for outreach. With five co-founders working on OurGoods for a over year, however, most of the OurGoods labor is not remunerated in cash. We will benefit from using OurGoods, but as an infrastructure for mutualism, it is an act for the commons, so we need to barter with the commons. This is an ongoing dilemma for us and many open source people. How do we support public works today?

The site will eventually have a point system (an online currency to assist indirect barterers) that could pay individuals who work for OurGoods, but the point system cannot exist without a robust network and a communal acknowledgement of the site's value. Just as our national currency only works because we all agree to use it, we cannot implement a point system until a community of trust is established.

**Who do you hope will use OurGoods?**

**Caroline:** Anyone with art, design, or craft projects (so called "cultural producers").

**What are your thoughts on the virtual context of your service? Is something lost by not bartering with others in a physical and known community?**

**Caroline:** The virtual component of OurGoods is necessary because artists and designers comprise a transient community, always on the move. In some ways, OurGoods.org is simply a directory of available creative people ready to connect in real space to share skills and head towards a barter negotiation. In-person meetings are incredibly important. This is why we will have a storefront for the next month in the Lower East Side. We are also looking for a long term space.

**Can you tell us more about your plans for the storefront? Any special programs or events we should look out for?**

**Caroline:** From January 25th to March 1st, the OurGoods group is running a storefront at 139 Norfolk Street in the Lower East Side. This space is called Trade School and will help OurGoods members get to know each other while sharing resources: the space is for co-working by day and sharing skills by night. Find out more at [GoPublicProjects.com](http://GoPublicProjects.com) or [OurGoods.org](http://OurGoods.org).

INFO: Trade School

**Caroline:** From January 25th to March 1st, the OurGoods group is running a storefront at 139 Norfolk Street in the Lower East Side. This space is called Trade School and will help OurGoods members get to know each other while sharing resources: the space is for co-working by day and sharing skills by night. Find out more at [GoPublicProjects.com](http://GoPublicProjects.com) or [OurGoods.org](http://OurGoods.org).

INFO: Trade School

By Day: A Shop

Drop in to barter with artists, designers, and craftspeople on a range of products and services. Peruse the trading board for things you want, and leave a contact card for things you have to offer. Skilled staff will help you make connections.

By Night: A School

Take a class with a range of specialized teachers in exchange for basic items and services. Secure a spot in a Trade School class by meeting one of the teacher's barter needs. For example, grant writer Caroline Woolard is looking for local produce from the farmers market. Agree to bring her a dozen crisp apples, and you're in.

DAILY

11-3: Co-working for TradeSchool teachers

3-6: Barter Agents Available

6-9: TradeSchool

**How can we get involved in OurGoods? When do you launch?**

**Caroline:** Sign up to be part of the public launch at [www.OurGoods.org](http://www.OurGoods.org). We will launch to the public in the Spring!

**What are some books or articles that have influenced your thinking about new economic models?**

**Caroline:** *Creating and Understanding Alternatives to Legal Tender* by Thomas Grecco, *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde, *Slow Money* by Woody Tasch, excerpts from *The International Journal of Community Currency Research*, and *Predictably Irrational* by Dan Ariely.

*Jenny Jaskey is Rhizome's Curatorial Fellow*