

TRADE SCHOOL: BARTERING FOR SKILLS WITH OURGOODS

By Nana Asfour March 24, 2011

What would happen in a world without cash? How would we acquire goods or learn new skills? Could contemporary society function under the antiquated model of bartering? These are the questions that drove a group of creative young New Yorkers to band together, shortly after the 2008 market crash, and form a barter network called OurGoods.

The first test was finding a space. In short time, they struck a deal—through bartering, of course—with the owners of the Lower East Side storefront GrandOpening, which has served in the past as a bar, a Las Vegas-style chapel, a ping-pong parlor, and a drive-in theatre. In exchange for design work, OurGoods was given run of the space for an entire month, free.

And so, in February of last year, OurGoods transformed GrandOpening into a bartering agency and office area by day, and what they called “Trade School” by night. While the object swaps proved to be too complicated, the school, touted as “barter for instruction,” was a hit. As it turned out, many New Yorkers were eager to share their particular, specialized expertise (butter-making, composting, grant-writing) or knowledge (how to make irrational decisions, the history of taste, WordPress) with interested parties. To attend, students just had to satisfy the instructor’s needs or desires in some small way. The entrance fee could be anything from serenading the teacher to filing receipts to lending a laser cutter.

The classes filled up quickly, and the curriculum expanded by the day. When its run in the Lower East Side came to a close, OurGoods vowed to resurrect its Trade School elsewhere. A year later, the school is back, this time in a bigger space, at 32 Prince Street, with classes running until April 17th.

The collective’s innovative approach has also caught the attention of the Whitney Museum, which is hosting the Trade School on the evening of March 25th. From seven to nine, classes will be held simultaneously in the museum’s café, courtyard, conference room, and stairwell. Students will bring objects they have made in exchange for classes, and the collection of bartered objects will be displayed in the museum. On offer, class-wise: “Kant to Kiergaard: The Philosophy of Plumbing 101”; “It Doesn’t Come Out Brown: The Basics of Distilling Alcohol”; and “Monday Painter/Sunday Banker,” which its Yale-graduate teacher, Amy Whitaker, describes as “a class in economics as a creative practice.”

As for the items that will go on view, Caroline Woolard, a founder of OurGoods, says it's difficult to predict. "I assume we will see everything from homemade pickles to paintings, from sporks to sheet music or poetry."

Woolard, a twenty-seven-year-old visual artist who graduated from Cooper Union, studied bartering extensively before joining forces with other cash-strapped New Yorkers who wanted to sidestep the pecuniary model. "Artists have always done work regardless of the economic market," Woolard told me. "We don't have money to give to each other, but we have expertise and relationships." For her own class, on grant-writing, Woolard asked her students for running shoes, size nine-and-a-half, and fresh produce.

Among the people who signed up to teach at the Trade School during its first run was Hannah Rawe. She gave a class on how to make a replica of a meteorite, which she learned while working at the Museum of Natural History. For her, as for many of the other students and teachers, many of whom have held both roles at the school, OurGoods' communalist philosophy is a refreshing alternative to an isolating money-based system. "I think it is a great idea, a kind of utopian way for artists to trade skills and things," she said. "Nobody I know really has any money."

Photograph via OurGoods.

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