



INTERVIEWS

Alternative Economies: A Conversation With Caroline Woolard



Ben Valentine | May 4, 2012



OurGoods' installation at "Living as Form" (all photos courtesy OurGoods)

We've all heard the complaints about income inequality. And although how to actually solve the economic crisis is up for debate, we all agree that it's a hard time to make a living. This is true for everyone, not just artists, but perhaps

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time to make a living. This is true for everyone, not just artists, but perhaps artists can lead the way in offering real alternatives to our flawed economic system. Artists, as creative people already faced with an extremely competitive market where success is hard won, are in a unique position to confront the issues of income distribution.

Kickstarter, [IndieGoGo](#) and [Sunday Soup](#) are among the popular programs offering alternative markets for the arts. These organizations are nothing to scoff at: Sunday Soup has 61 groups nationally that have raised \$57,355 to date, and in 2012 Kickstarter is expected to help raise more money for projects than the National Endowment for the Arts (more on that [here](#)).

A lesser known yet equally exciting group, [OurGoods](#) has similar goals of working outside and around the usual capitalist funding system — except it leaves money out of the mix altogether. I met one of the founders, Caroline Woolard, at Creative Time's [Living as Form](#) exhibition last year, and again at Eyebeam's [Activist Technology Demo Day](#). I decided to talk with her about what OurGoods has been up to.

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Ben Valentine: *What is OurGoods?*



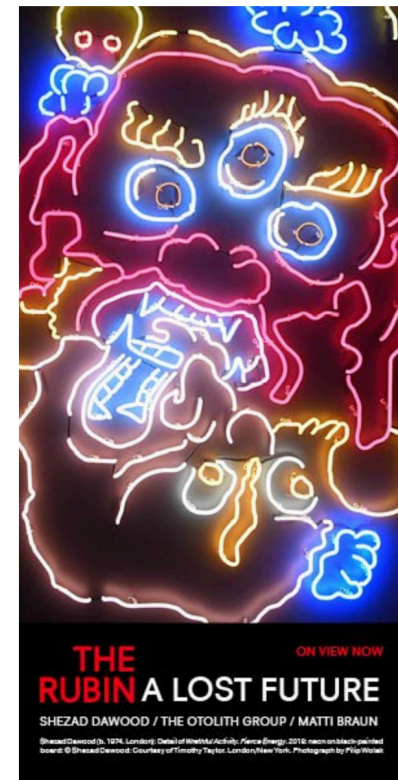
Caroline Woolard

Caroline Woolard: OurGoods is a barter network for creative people, connecting artists, designers and craftspeople in order to trade skills, spaces and objects with each other. It was started in 2009 by Carl Tashian, Jen Abrams, Louise Ma, Rich Watts and myself. We connected to a wide range of creative practices: choreography, computer engineering, design, sculpture, drawing,

furniture-making and writing. We work on the site together and produce in-person events like Barter 101 workshops and [Trade School](#), an alternative learning space that runs on barter (at Cuchifritos).

BV: *Why did you start OurGoods?*

CW: When the economy collapsed in 2009, arts organizations closed programs and fired staff. We all had less cash to work with, but that didn't mean we had fewer skills or ideas. Barter is a way to get work done no matter what the global economy is doing. It's a way to see the ideas, skills and



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what the global economy is doing. It's a way to see the ideas, skills and resources available in the creative community, and to actively engage one another in making new projects happen. We see OurGoods as a resilient model for cultural production, building relationships of trust and shared resources from the ground up.

BV: *I first ran into you at Creative Time's show Living as Form. What were you doing there?*

CW: We made "How Much Is Our Work Worth To Each Other?" to encourage action-oriented discussion about value and mutual aid in the arts. Flyers with "HAVES" and "NEEDS" were hung on a giant community notice board. This notice board served as both an analog version of the "HAVES" and "NEEDS" listed online at OurGoods.org, as well as a gathering place for personal messages and informal exchanges. Each weekend during the run of the exhibition, OurGoods hosted workshops about barter, value, cooperation and the solidarity economy.



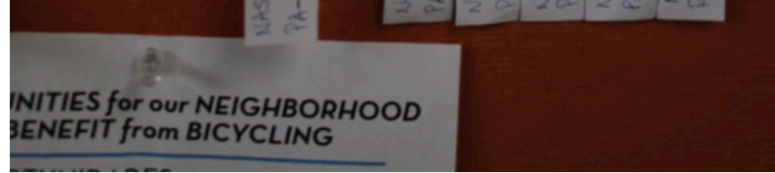
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A poster from OurGoods's installation at "Living as Form"

BV: *How do you contextualize OurGoods? Is it a social-practice artwork, a project or what?*

CW: OurGoods asks participants to involve themselves fully in exchange. If this kind of deep thinking–doing is social practice, then OurGoods is a social-practice project. At Creative Time, we often found people reluctant to fully engage. This could be because art is often experienced as an abstract idea or proposal to discuss, not a plausible reality to fully involve oneself in — both in body and mind. People might say “good idea” rather than “how can I get involved?”

I’m interested in work that balances theory and practice, making its intentions known and holding space for participation in alignment with those intentions. These works often exist both in and outside art contexts, activating communities in disparate fields with real issues at stake. For example, Trade School is not just about the content education (practical skills), it’s about the format of education (barter and self-organization). Higher education in the US is both about information hoarding and debt burdens. By participating in an expensive MFA program, participants reproduce the value and social acceptance of expensive MFAs. By participating in Trade School, participants reproduce the value and social acceptance of mutual aid and self-organized learning systems.

BV: *What brought you to Activist Technology Demo Day?*

CW: I wanted to share OurGoods with activists, because right now we have many people with art degrees on OurGoods, but there’s so much potential for collaborations and barter to support both kinds of projects. For example, an activist could help an artist think through a long-term political vision and how an artwork works towards that vision, and an artist could help an activist use aesthetics to affect the public. Of course, many artists are activists. More artists are opening up to the power of collective decision making through Occupy Wall Street. The OWS Art and Labor group has been talking about self-organization and working on actions in solidarity with non-arts groups.

BV: *Many projects at Activist Technology Demo Day displayed were using technology to capture and amplify dissent instead of working to resolve the problems, which has been a critique of the Occupy movement and is probably why I appreciate OurGoods so much. Can you talk about this difference?*

CW: OurGoods asks people to have action-oriented conversations about value and exchange. This is why we called the installation at Creative Time “How Much Is Our Work Worth To Each Other?” Rather than complain about our collective lack of funding or opportunities, let’s create support systems for ourselves.

BV: *What other projects are you currently working on?*

CW: I’m part of three long-term collectives/ongoing projects: OurGoods, Trade School, and SolidarityNYC. I’m not interested in short-term projects because I want to build community. I also teach at the New School (a class called “Barter: The Social Practice of Non-Monetary Exchange”) and co-organize an 8,000 square foot studio space where 30 artists live and work. This makes for a very busy life!
