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Alternative Art Economies: A Primer

Erin Sickler

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ALTERNATIVE ARTECONOMIES A PRIMER

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The Alternative Art Economies primer is a 962-page compilation of links, reading lists, and essays that relate to art's economy, assembled and discussed over the course of three workshops in spring 2011. The first two workshops were held at Trade School, an alternative school in New York City where students offer goods and services in return for instruction. Trade School's explicit focus on barter encourages people to think about our shifting notions of value and the conditions we establish for exchange. The third workshop took place under the auspices of artist Maureen Connor and the Institute for Wishful Thinking at Momena Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. All told, dozens of participants contributed to these discussions, but it was ten individuals who created and disseminated the document. Because of the makeup of the participant group and the location of the workshops, the primer maintains a specific focus on the creative economy of New York.¹



Institute for Wishful Thinking at Momena Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (left); Trade School, New York, NY (right)

Roughly divided into thematic sections, each portion of the primer addresses a different aspect of the relationship between art and economy. The first section covers recent attempts by artists to make sense of how artists fit within the current state of the world's economy. Some of the most direct analysis appears in *Art Work, A National Conversation about Art, Labor, and Economics* (<http://www.artandwork.us/>), a newspaper put together in the wake of the U.S. economic crisis by the group Temporary Services in which artists discuss their experiences as cultural laborers. On a more intimate note, essays by artists Joe Scanlan, Marc Fisher, Emily Roysdon, and 16 Beaver Group address the ways that artists can alter their individual behavior to stimulate a different set of economic relations. Scanlan calls on artists to recognize that any entity that confers value on artistic production can be construed as a market, be it the commercial gallery system, nonprofit institutions, university art departments, or granting agencies. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to transcend the reach of capital, he urges artists to use their embedded positions to alter the markets they inhabit (Scanlan 2009, 313).

Beyond the art market, the primer seeks a more expansive definition of the art economy. In her three-part essay concerning the rise of the creative class, artist Martha Rosler scrutinizes the way that artists' inclination to recognize beauty in blight has been instrumentalized for the purpose of real-estate development. Rosler's chief focus is New York City, while two short papers by Merijn Oudenampsen chart a parallel situation in Amsterdam. Opening up new horizons for thinking about ways to avoid speculative development, the last section includes essays by economic organizer Ethan Miller and geographers Jenny Cameron and J. K. Gibson-Graham that outline transitional modes of capitalism that cultivate already extant systems of humane and sustainable exchange. And finally, as a concrete example of these transitional models, the food system is offered up as a proxy for the art world, as an industry that is currently testing the boundaries between luxury and necessity.

¹ The primer is available for download through the open source site AAAARG and can be downloaded directly via the URL: <http://www.mediafire.com/?2a6ebv6kqhx2i2d>.

Taken together, these writings express growing skepticism about the ability of the nation-state, whether through litigation or electoral politics, to control the flows of labor, industry, and capital that define people's daily existence. Alain Badiou (2007) defines this perspective as a crisis of negation. He cites the Zapatistas and Hezbollah as evidence that even the most violent uprisings in the twenty-first century have little to do with replacing one form of government with another, but instead are waged to define a new set of economic relations between the state, the economy, and the people. He asks: if the state is no longer the primary arbiter of political relationships, how can people around the world who face the same oppressive economic conditions unite themselves when they are divided by borders and marginalized by the politics of the state? How can human economic rights extend beyond national borders?

In Norman Rush's 1991 novel *Mating*, the anthropologist Nelson Denoon renounces both socialism and capitalism to build his anarcho-feminist village on the edge of the Kalahari desert. The book vividly outlines Tsau's economic and political systems. With rich detail, it describes the methods for transporting goods and water and for harnessing the sun's energy, as well as the cooperative models used to distribute authority and power within the village. At the heart of the novel is more than just a love story between a wayward doctoral student and a quasi-colonialist anthropologist, but a fiction that makes visible the local struggles for democratic political participation that take place in the real world. Like Nelson Denoon, artists are adept at calling forth new ideas and finding ways to live inside them. What then is to prevent artists from directing their efforts at devising communities based on cooperation and mutual aid?

The Alternative Art Economies primer makes no promise of outlining a new art economy, but it does represent a challenge to the idea that the relationship between art and speculative capital is a universal and ahistorical phenomenon. This may be well-worn territory for *Rethinking Marxism* readers but, to my great surprise, these ideas are often unfamiliar to artists or are so couched in the theoretical language of spectacle, autonomy, simulacra, and representation as to render them useless for any kind of actionable response. Part of my struggle in hosting these workshops was that what I thought to be common knowledge was not common at all. My conclusion after making this primer was that it was truly the beginning of the discussion. What follows here is simply my modest attempt to summarize these findings in a way that opens up the possibility of agency within a larger, more complex discourse.

The Art Industry

Mention the art economy and artists will likely speak to the art market, of the various ways in which museums, galleries, auction houses, curators, and collectors confer commercial success on a small number of artists while ignoring the rest. And yet, for most artists, the complex algorithm for success remains largely a mystery. When sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) set out to systematically examine the value of artistic production, he observed that artistic achievement was not solely a matter of individual genius or the result of valorization by galleries, collectors, and institutions, but instead was the complex by-product of social transactions between the wealthy and those with cultural capital (artists).

In Bourdieu's time, great lengths were taken to prevent those transactions from becoming overt. Today, however, money is visible everywhere in the art world. What was once a small, mercantile-like sector with a small number of producers making a unique product for a small number of consumers has become a \$61.5-billion industry, which by some accounts has grown twenty times over the past twenty years (see CINOA 2011). Worldwide, the number of artists has exploded to meet the growing demands of this market. According to the College Art Association, in the United States and Canada alone, the number of MFA programs has risen from 168 in 1992 to 350 in 2010, churning out ever hopeful throngs of artists to fill new gallery rosters. As new centers of contemporary art production in China, Russia, and India produce their own contenders for the global market, art fairs, biennial exhibitions, and international art publications take precedence as showrooms for this ecumenical world of art.²

² A more thorough assessment of art's transformation by speculative capital can be found in Gregory Sholette's *Dark Matter* (2010).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new class of investors, made rich by exporting oil and cheap consumer goods to the West, aggressively pursued new avenues for low-risk, high-return investment. These collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) and securitized loans made speculation possible in previously untouchable markets by aggregating smaller loans into large debt pools and then selling the returns on those aggregate debts. Less familiar than mortgage-based CDOs were other financial instruments created during this boom time, such as art-backed securities. With rates of return on treasury certificates and municipal bonds at an all-time low, these new tools became even more attractive to rich investors seeking stable assets in a volatile market. In this environment, where art is viewed mainly as an investment, known artists like Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, and Jackson Pollock become even more valuable while young artists are promoted relentlessly to drive up their perceived market value and artificially raise them to the level of celebrity.

Who gains when speculative forces are unleashed on the world? Whose values does the art market represent? If the tendency of traditional art patrons was to protect the prestige of artists and cultural objects, the priority of many new collectors is to ensure a substantial return. Inherently, artists understand that the production of a few superstars is based on the unrewarded labor of them all. For those who wish to exploit this system and have the opportunity to do so, being an artist today can be more financially lucrative than ever, but value is not analogous to price and, for many artists seeking a more expansive definition of success, speculative markets represent a diminution of art's true significance.

In the 1970s and 1980s, artists in New York banded together into collectives as they attempted to wrest control over cultural production away from commerce. This alternative art economy was made possible by the leftover oppositional energy of the 1960s, cheap rent, and abundant public funding for the arts. Often these alternative practices were fashioned in solidarity with women, people of color, and the LGBT community, who were seeking greater cultural visibility and economic justice. Today, however, once radical spaces provide programming that differs little from the commercial galleries and museums that surround them. Former Group Material member Julie Ault attributes this shift from alternative to institutional to the political backlash of the 1980s culture wars and the subsequent cuts to arts funding, but it is likely that these changes were also the result of a more gradual transformation.

Beginning in the 1990s, anthropologist Laurel George (1998) followed choreographers and dancers in New York to observe how changes in arts funding shifted the primary relationships in dance production from creative-personal to corporate-professional, as dance companies established internal hierarchies and competed against one another for funding. George's study found that not only do radical cultural organizations become more conservative over time, but underlying structures can work at cross-purposes to stated missions. Such findings place the onus not just on artists but on curators, directors, administrators, and funders to create new infrastructures that foster potential alternatives, giving voice to reflexive versus authoritative modes of inquiry, supporting cellular and viral ways of working, and instituting horizontal versus vertical power arrangements.

Artists and Cities

One of the most salient characteristics of artists' collective economic value is the way that capital seems to pool in the places where artists live and work. Drawing attention to formerly marginalized regions of the city, artists inject cultural cachet into previously undervalued spaces. The less savory aspect of this process is the now familiar tale of gentrification—how artists, seeing opportunity where others see ruin, redeem underused spaces, displacing previous residents and industries, until they themselves are displaced. But rather than blaming artists, the primer asks if we can imagine other ways to direct these powers of redemption or, in other words, can artists use their alchemical power to summon investment in ways that *détourne* the relationship between creativity and speculation?

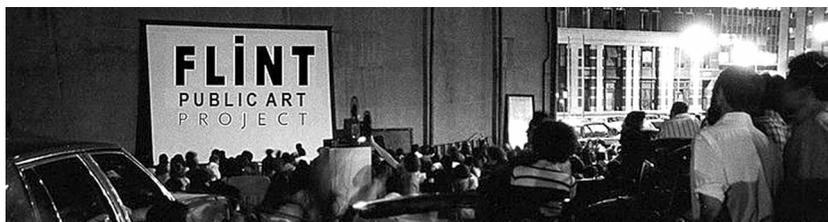
Sharon Zukin (1982) gives careful attention to the precise sequence of events that led to a drastic change in New York's cityscape, situating this metamorphosis at the vanguard of a more global trend toward what David Harvey deems the "deindustrialization of large urban regions, the rise of the service sector, the changes in labour processes, and the reorganization of housing markets (around 'gentrification')." (quoted in Zukin 1982, ix). Zukin argues that Soho's transformation to a luxury

neighborhood was based on a three-part recipe of desire: (1) desire on the part of the city to expand residential construction in the districts close to Wall Street, (2) desire on the part of the middle class to embrace the artist's flexible lifestyle, and (3) desire by historic preservationists to maintain the outward appearance of buildings while dispensing with their original function, creating a fetish for the recently old. But beyond the meticulousness of her study, Zukin's major contribution to the story of twentieth-century urban change is her close attention to the ambiguous role played by artists (17).

For its August 1949 issue, *Life* magazine devoted a four-page spread to painter Jackson Pollock, dubbing him "the greatest living painter in the United States." By the 1950s, a newfound respect for artists on the part of the middle class had also produced new esteem for the artist's lifestyle. A growing gallery sector opened the art world to a broader public. Events like Fluxus Happenings and Loft Jazz brought this public directly into contact with the artist's way of life and, to the extent that this marketing of the creative lifestyle succeeded, it redirected a portion of middle-class desire back from the suburbs to the city (94–6). Unlike a suburb, where discrete boundaries separate life from work, the loft promised a more fluid, flexible lifestyle. Advertisements emphasized the loft's open floorplan, monumental proportions, and convenience to urban amenities and, by the 1970s, the word loft was more synonymous with luxury than with artistic production (62–5).

As early as the 1930s, power brokers like the Rockefellers had convinced New York City leaders to shift the city's economy away from manufacturing toward the paper-intensive sectors of real estate, insurance, and finance. By the 1970s, the city could no longer afford to undertake the expensive urban renewal projects it had in the first part of the century. To spur development, it passed tax incentives like the J-51 code to encourage private firms to convert warehouses and industrial spaces into residential zones. In a complementary strategy, the city also acquired derelict properties, leveled them, and sold the lots to the highest bidder. In both cases, these policies cleared the way for the displacement of small manufacturers and the urban poor (150–1). Initially, artists supported the rezoning as a way to save small manufacturing. Only later did they realize that they were just the driving wedge in an overall scheme to remake Manhattan and, by the late 1970s, most artists had been priced out of downtown lofts (122–5). In the years since Zukin's study, this pattern has repeated itself in countless neighborhoods throughout New York and the world.³

It is with a subtle knowledge of these transformations that urbanist Stephen Zacks initiated The Flint Public Art Project. Documented in the 1989 Michael Moore film *Roger and Me*, Flint, Michigan, is emblematic of the industrial disinvestment, population loss, and manufacturing decline of shrinking cities throughout the world. In Flint, Zacks has begun to experiment with ways in which artists and other members of the college-educated elite can consciously channel "economic resources, increased commercial activity, attention from the media and city administrators, better schools and policing" (2011, 6). Instead of using their oppositional energy for forms of aesthetic *détournement*—the constant revolt against the so-called mainstream through art, fashion, music, and aesthetic subcultures—Zacks advises elites to direct their activities toward reviving neglected economies in solidarity with underrepresented groups (7). As part of Zacks's project, cultural producers are invited to contribute creative approaches and ideas to influence the city of Flint's new master plan.



³ In 2002, when urbanist Richard Florida published his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, he repackaged this idea of artistic living as an unbeatable formula for remaking the postindustrial city.

The writer and thinker Georges Bataille (1988) believed that it was in society's excess that one could witness the irrational, affective, and erotic drives of capitalism. Seeking a way out of the scarcity-based model of classical economics, Bataille turned to anthropologist Marcel Mauss and his study of the potlatch society to understand the power of abundance. In a potlatch society, one group or individual lavishes gifts on another, but the paradox of the gift is that by giving something away, the giver confers a debt on the recipient. The desire to reciprocate can either hold a society together or tear it apart. Bearing little resemblance to the free-market notion that each player in an economic system is driven by his or her rational capacity to maximize resources, Bataille suggests that true sovereignty lies in how and where individuals choose to direct their surplus energy and assets (1988, 106). Artists, who rarely make much money off their art, paradoxically find themselves in proximity to great wealth. Rather than affecting disinterestedness, trying their best to ignore the money that circulates around them, projects such as Zacks's suggest that artists could use their power of influence to create new conduits, funneling resources from areas of surplus to areas of need.

Critical Regionalism

Over the past twenty years, along with the rise of the Internet and global finance, the global has become the dominant regime of art production. From Gwangju, South Korea, to Johannesburg, South Africa, the spectacular, large-scale art exhibition has become ubiquitous. Even as this emerging globalism has been somewhat successful in unseating the Western-dominant discourse of art by including the people formerly at its margins, its role as a tastemaker implicitly links it to the interests of the art market and the expansion of capital. The result is a global bazaar of largely interchangeable cultural products.

Warning of a similar trend in architecture, Kenneth Frampton coined the term *critical regionalism* to counteract the homogenizing effects of mass culture and industrial technology upon contemporary building design. According to Frampton, modern architecture's emphasis on the universal had come to dominate postmodern architecture to the extent that new buildings were more determined by the materials cheaply available on the global market than by any imaginative response to beauty, space, and function (1983, 21). Frampton championed a manner of working in which locally sourced materials and traditional construction methods could be applied to contemporary design in order to produce a more varied and sustainable architecture. Applied to artistic production, the idea of critical regionalism suggests a practice that responds to the local culture while simultaneously availing itself of an international aesthetic discourse.

The art collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) (1998) cites their cellular model as necessary to meet all the various demands placed on conceptual artists—to articulate ideas in speech and writing, to be versed in the theory and history of numerous disciplines, to be administrators, fabricators, grant writers, event planners, and diplomats. Occupying different roles at different times, CAE's members possess a wide variety of skills. This allows them to choose whatever form is best suited for their project, be it a Web site, a guerilla action, or a museum installation, and also gives them access to a broader range of resources and funding opportunities. Still, they acknowledge that this tactical approach finds little support in an art world that remains tied to the trope of the gifted individual.

Although a full-fledged nonprofit organization, the anarchist art space ABC No Rio also functions on a model of horizontal governance. Composed of various collectives—the visual arts collective, the zine library, the screen-printing collective, the punk show collective—each group maintains autonomy over its individual programming while sharing responsibility for the organization as a whole. While the board of directors oversees the fiduciary health of the organization, its decisions do not override the wishes of the full membership. Such a structure, while enabling the organization to run almost entirely on volunteer labor, can render No Rio unattractive to funders who take comfort in vertical chains of command and control.

To embrace the alternative in an alternative art economy means fostering governing structures that make true democracy possible. Despite a resurgent interest in collectivism and social engagement, little emphasis has been placed on the internal relationships that allow collective creativity to prosper. Historically, caring has been the task of women and even within radical art circles, the labor of nurturing and maintaining often goes underrecognized. As a start, reassessing

undervalued forms of labor and instituting models that emphasize care helps to underscore the fact that art production is always a form of collaboration.

Still, most artists never make a living from their work and few become known beyond their intimate circle. The for-profit and nonprofit art industries make up only a subdivision of art's economy. Measuring the full impact of artists on the economy necessitates a step beyond the art industry to look at other places where money rubs up against art. The primary questions raised by the idea of critical regionalism are: How can we understand the specific historical events, legislative statutes, and aesthetic discourses that define our own local art economy? How can we use this knowledge to foster economic structures that rely on a democratic process of decisionmaking in which people and labor are prioritized over capital and profits? And, finally, rather than remaking the wheel or seeking answers "out there," how can we partner with already existing cooperative structures to strengthen networks of economic solidarity and civil society both near and far?

Sometimes New York seems like the center of cut-throat competition.
But there are many New Yorkers thriving in mutual benefit.

They say:

I DON'T HAVE A BOSS.
I'M A WORKER-OWNER IN A COOPERATIVE BUSINESS.

I DON'T HAVE A LANDLORD.
I'M A MEMBER OF A HOUSING CO-OP OR INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

I DON'T NEED TO BUY MORE STUFF.
I TAKE PART IN TOOL-SHARES, BARTER CLUBS, AND CLOTHING SWAPS.

I KNOW WHERE MY FOOD CAME FROM.
I'M A MEMBER OF A FOOD CO-OP, CSA, AND COMMUNITY GARDEN.

I DON'T WANT MY BANK TO MAKE PROFIT FOR THE SAKE OF PROFIT.
I JOINED A CREDIT UNION, SO MY MONEY STAYS IN THE COMMUNITY.

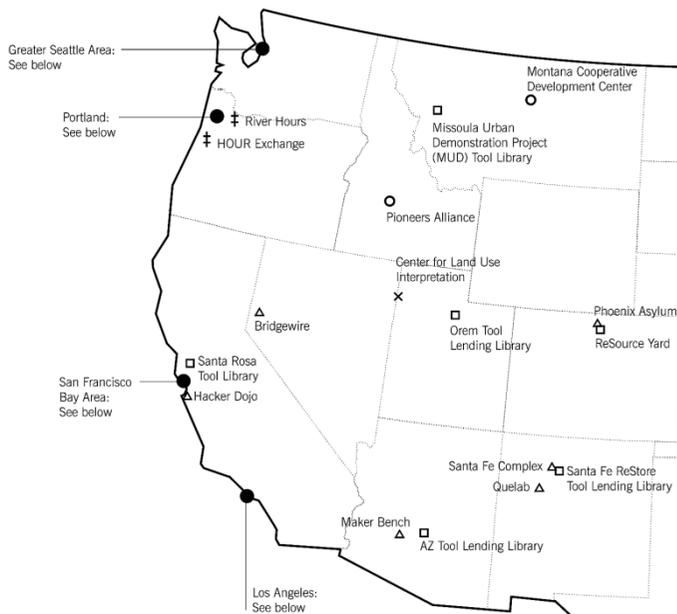
There are so many ways to be part of an economy that supports
people and the planet over profit.

We're mapping the ones in New York City at SolidarityNYC.org.

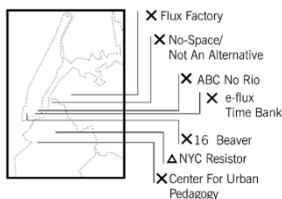
SOLIDARITY
nyc
WWW.SOLIDARITYNYC.ORG

SolidarityNYC poster: Caroline Woolard, text; Andrew Persoff and Nathan Heliene, graphic design

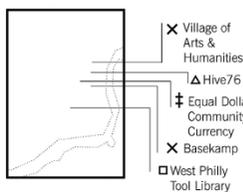
CRITICAL REGIONALISM



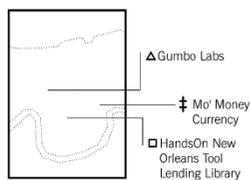
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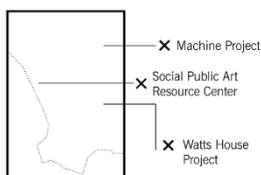
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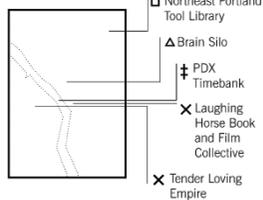
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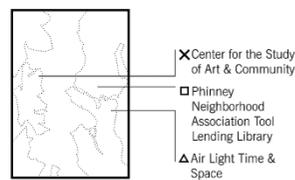
Los Angeles

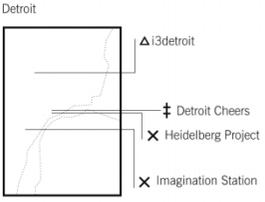
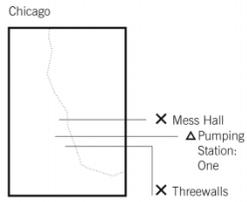
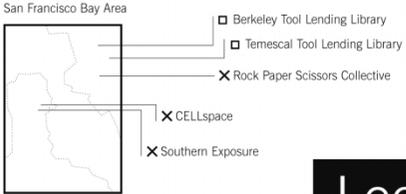
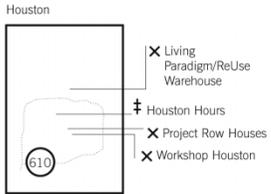
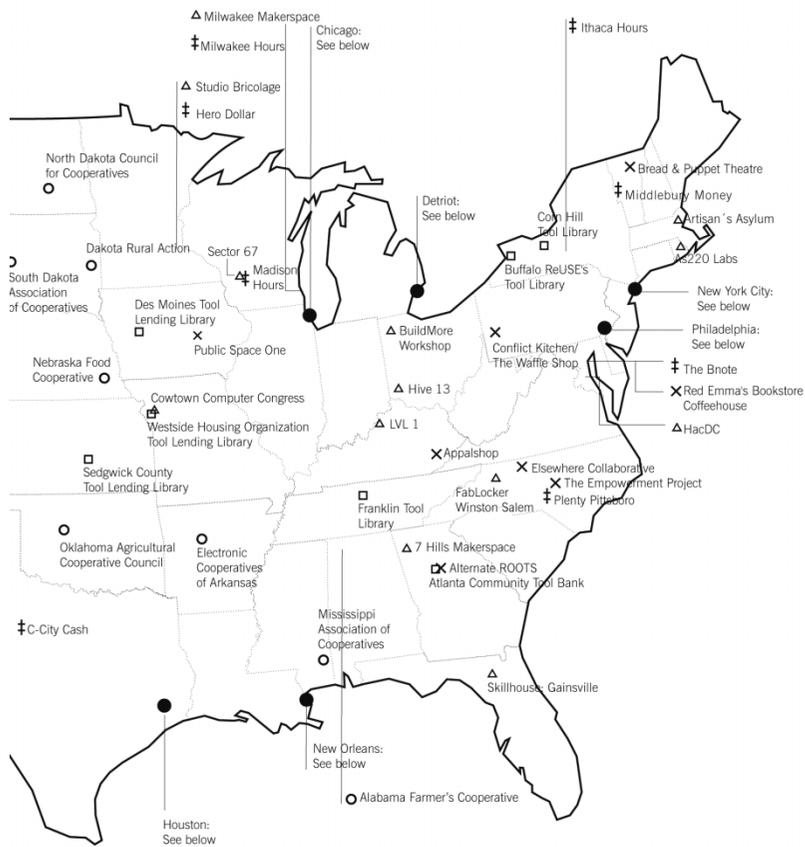


Portland



Greater Seattle Area





Legend

- X Art Space
- △ Hacker and Makerspace
- Tool Lending Library
- † Local Currency
- Agricultural and Energy Cooperative

Designed in collaboration with urban planner Susana Arellano Alvarado and designer Kate Dewitt, the map of Critical Regionalism locates artistic practices and other economic structures within the United States that already emphasize the principle of mutual aid.⁴ As a map—rather than the territory itself—it is far from a complete taxonomy of artists and art collectives working toward democratic participation and economic equality. As an illustration, it encourages artists to consider using their unique sets of skills as well as the conditions of their lives in ways that nourish broader initiatives.⁵ The second phase of the Critical Regionalism project, now under development, is a website that will be used to provide specific resources for alternative modes of funding, organization, and governance and to strengthen the solidarity of socially minded art entities with other, like-minded organizations. The challenge is to construct a platform that will be useful to people rather than serving as placeholder for an idea.

For his ongoing project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*, the artist Oliver Ressler has created an ever growing archive to document ideas for alternative political and economic systems. These go by a variety of names, including *Inclusive Democracy, Participatory Economy, Anarchist Consensual Democracy, Libertarian Municipalism*, and, even, *bolo'bolo*.⁶ The principle they share is one of participatory democracy, in which producers and users negotiate the terms of their labor, consumption, and exchange. The Mondragón corporation in the Basque region of Spain provides a real-life example of this philosophy, a region guided by cooperative principles.⁷ What makes Mondragón the subject of particular international interest is not only that it is a successful cooperative social system, but it is a business model that has profited in the midst of economic crisis. Beyond the mammoth Mondragón, many smaller worker cooperatives employ these same principles and have also weathered the storm better than their for-profit counterparts. One of the primary goals of the website is to translate these strategies of cooperative enterprise into models for organizing and producing art.

Historically, game-changing innovations are as much a consequence of necessity and opportunity as individual merit. Contrary to popular belief, artists rarely come across new ideas by sitting alone in their studios, and the added value that artists bring to a place and time bears little relation to their position within the commercial artworld hierarchy. It is with this in mind that I believe the *Alternative Art Economies* primer works like a homeopathic injection, a microstimulation to the participants who participated in its conception and distribution. As bleak as the current economic situation may be, there is a growing awareness that the cornerstone of any kind of alternative economy lies in empowering ourselves to imagine a different distribution of power and wealth. Artists, perhaps better than anyone, know that human activity has no inherent value. Rather, it is people, coming together, who designate whether something has worth.

⁴ The map can be downloaded in its full size at <http://criticalregionalism.org>.

⁵ An example of a local solidarity economy map is the one produced by Solidarity NYC (<http://solidaritynyc.org/projects/solidarity-economies-in-nyc>). The solidarity economy consists of enterprises such as alternative currencies, barter economies, worker and consumer cooperatives, advocacy groups, and open source initiatives that function on the premise of mutual aid and shared profits.

⁶ Oliver Ressler, *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*, 2003–ongoing, at http://www.ressler.at/alternative_economics/.

⁷ Ratified by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1995, the statement on cooperative identity defines cooperatives as organizations that have (1) open, voluntary membership, (2) democratic governance, (3) limited return on equity, (4) surplus belonging to members, (5) education of members and public in cooperative principles, (6) cooperation between cooperatives, and (7) concern for community.

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