One day in 1984, the artist J.S.G. Boggs was eating a donut and drinking coffee at a diner in Chicago when he absentmindedly drew a one dollar bill on a greasy napkin. Impressed by Boggs’s talent, his waitress asked if she could buy the drawing. Boggs refused to sell. The waitress offered him fifty dollars for it; he turned her down. But when it came time to settle the bill — a dollar for his snack — Boggs proposed leaving the napkin as a form of payment. The waitress accepted, and an art practice was born. Boggs has continued to draw US dollars, British pounds, Swiss francs, and more, exchanging his handmade creations for everything from a room at a five-star hotel in Basel to a six-pack of beer in New York.

Boggs is only one in a long line of artists using their work to point out the absurdities and precariousness of our economies. Thirty years before his Chicago encounter, the Italian artist Piero Manzoni canned thirty grams of his own shit
A local currency is taking root in north Brooklyn, thanks to an artist. There are barter networks (https://ourgoods.org/) specifically for cultural producers. Members of Occupy Museums have started something called DebtFair (http://debtfair.org/index), which lets buyers help alleviate artists’ debt by having them write checks directly to loaning banks in exchange for art. And virtual currencies are blossoming online, with artists increasingly accepting them (http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/how-virtual-currencies-are-helping-starving-artists-get-paid) as a form of payment; Molly Crabapple, who’s known for her darkly funny, Victorian, carnivalesque paintings and for being one of only a few artists to visit and draw Guantanamo Bay, announced not long ago that she would begin accepting payment for her work in Bitcoins.

But how do these alternative economic models work — or, put another way, just how alternative are they? Is the phrase itself anything besides art world–cum–activist jargon, a catchall for projects in a certain vein? Does alternative equal subversive, and what does it take to be either these days?

Mary Jeys began working on a local currency for north Brooklyn back in 2009. Clear-eyed and round-faced, someone you can talk to on first meeting as if you’ve known her for a long time, Jeys (http://www.maryjeys.com/) is a post-BFA transplant from Austin, Texas. She had previously been working on more tongue-in-cheek projects (http://www.maryjeys.com/portfolio/) centered on the movie series Die Hard, but one day, an idea to came to her: she would ride around New York with some kind of mobile ATM on a bike. When she told her friends about it, nearly all of them insisted she’d get beat up if she carried so much cash. “I realized that I was touching something about trust,” she recalled recently in her shared studio at Dobbins Project Space (http://dobbinsprojectspace.tumblr.com/) in Greenpoint. “I was touching this belief system that economic sustainability, or economic methodology, is actually a cipher for interpersonal trust and faith that we are not going to stab each other for that thing we both want.”

In lieu of the two-wheeled ATM, someone suggested she create a local currency. Jeys quickly saw what the project could be: a mechanism of exchange that could stand in for the trust relationships she wanted to explore; a means of potentially shifting the economy, or at least the way people participated in and approached it; a thought experiment that could open up intriguingly unknown outcomes.

This was in 2009, when the economy was deep in crisis and Jeys was unemployed. She began working on logistics like what area the currency
Nearly every piece of writing about local currencies starts with the disclaimer that, yes, they are legal (so consider this yours). Not only that, but they appear to be relatively popular: an article on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_community_currencies_in_the_United_States), indicates that people in 36 states and Washington, D.C., have tried them out at some point, and a piece in The Atlantic (http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/05/the-next-money-as-the-big-economies-falter-micro-currencies-rise/257216/) last year details current experiments of the kind in the UK and Germany. The Torch's aren't even Brooklyn's first local currency: the Green party launched the Brooklyn Greenbacks (whose name references the first American government-issued paper money, which financed the Civil War (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenback_(money))) in 1997, making one Greenback equal to “a living hourly wage in New York City,” or twelve dollars. They’ve since died off. Given the difficulty of both launching and sustaining local currencies, their life spans are usually short. Even communities that have had success — places like Ithaca, NY, where $100,000 worth of Ithaca Hours (http://www.ithacahours.org/) have come into circulation since 1991 and the Berkshire region of Massachusetts, where many local banks have been accepting BerkShares (http://www.berkshares.org/) since in 2006 — struggle (http://www.ithaca.com/news/article_175100c4-65d6-11e0-bd73-001cc4c002e0.html) to maintain them.

The question remains, though: what's the point of a local currency? "The theory is that if you have enough exchanges happening here, it's supporting the neighborhood better than the dollar, because the dollar can leave," Jeys explained. "The dollar is valid outside of this boundary line. The Torch, or whatever the local currency is, can only be honored here. So the notion is that it circulates at a higher rate because it's only valuable here."
Theory, of course, is different than practice, and on a cool and sunny afternoon in mid-September, I spent thirty of my Brooklyn Torches quite a ways outside of the prescribed zone, in Central Park. After speaking to Jeys, I had emailed a handful of people on the Brooklyn Torch registry (http://brooklyntorch.org/registry/), a website that lists services offered in exchange for the currency. Only two people responded, one of whom had signed up while living in Brooklyn but had since moved to Texas. (He was initially willing to make me a mix tape for Torches anyway but after a few emails stopped writing back.) The other person was Karen Dahlberg, whose listing advertises tap-dancing lessons in a public park, “party starting at your formal event,” or “wingman services in North Brooklyn.” I chose tap.

Karen, whose last name is now O’Connell and who now lives on the Upper West Side, joined the Brooklyn Torch registry three and a half years ago at a gallery opening in Dumbo. Someone had set up a table with information about the project and was giving away clothes in exchange for sign-ups. “I thought this was hilarious, and I’ll join this social experiment,” she recalled in Central Park. She walked away with five Brooklyn Torches, a hoodie, and a handbag, and never heard anything about it again. I was the first person to contact her.

We met near the Central Park Mall, just north of the asphalt volleyball court. Karen was tap dancing—her body leaned forward, her arms swaying and feet hitting the pavement tirelessly — as I approached. After brief introductions, we dove into the lesson. Karen positioned herself across from me so she could reflect my moves like a mirror. We started with the shuffle and flap steps, which I learned to the rhythm of her words, repeating them aloud to myself. Shu-flle, shu-flle, shu-flle, step. My muscles rebelled as I forced them into unfamiliar positions. Fuh-lap heel, fuh-lap heel, fuh-lap heel, fuh-lap ball change. Rollerbladers whizzed past, sometimes shouting encouragement; a volleyball flew over our heads; tourists stopped to watch and take pictures.

At the very least, there needs to be a relatively stable community in which the currency can thrive. To achieve that in a bustling, transient place like New York City — even a small part of it — seems like a monumental challenge.

There was no real reason for me to take the lesson, beyond the fact that I like to dance. There was no real reason for Karen to agree to give it, beyond the fact that she enjoys teaching tap. “When I got your email, I was like, ‘I don’t know ...’” she admitted to me. “But I got that hoodie and that handbag, and I made that offer. I had to make good on it.”

After an intense and gratifying hour, we moved to a nearby fence to change our shoes. I learned that Karen is from California, surfs, and gave birth to an adorable baby seven months ago. I told her about the dance class I take and my boyfriend. We chatted for quite a while, until both of us needed to go, at which point I reached into my wallet for a couple of tan and orange bills. They had animals and symbols inked on them in black — on the front of the twenty, a scruffy dog sat in the center looking at an inflatable union rat, which stood off to the right, surrounded by less noble, crawling kin.

Karen told me she was grateful for the excuse to put on her tap shoes again and added, “I can’t wait to have this Torch burning a hole in my pocket.” But I wondered if and where she’d spend it. The back of the
Based on the research she’s done, Jeys says that local currencies work best in smaller, semi-rural regions, where there isn’t a ton of commerce and dollars aren’t changing hands at a high rate. The urban areas where they’ve tended to catch on, she adds, are depressed, places like Baltimore and Detroit. At the very least, there needs to be a relatively stable community in which the currency can thrive. To achieve that in a bustling, transient place like New York City — even a small part of it — seems like a monumental challenge.

Yet even if the theory were to become reality, it’s still unclear whether it would bring about the desired outcome: money staying in the community and buoying its economy. “Money, whether pounds or Brixton bricks, isn’t wealth,” wrote Financial Times columnist Tim Harford in 2008 about a local currency established in the London suburb of Brixton. “It’s just a way of keeping accounts, and swapping one system of accounts for another isn’t going to alter the basic productive potential of Brixton. True, community currencies may very gently encourage trade with locals rather than strangers. But the gains from more trade with locals are more than offset by the losses from less trade with strangers. Otherwise, economic sanctions would be a blessing.”

A local currency like the Brooklyn Torches presents people with an intriguing option, a spur for thinking about where and how they spend their money. But at the end of the day, it’s still cash: it apes the larger model it’s designed to counteract. If anything, I found that the Torches encouraged a certain profligacy because they didn’t feel entirely real. After I traded some books and articles of clothing to Jeys to get my Torches, I turned around and bought a dress from her that I definitely didn’t need.

More importantly, because I can’t pay my bills in Torches, or even yet buy my coffee in them, the currency’s uses are severely limited. Jeys is working to change this by having ongoing discussions with local business owners and the Greenpoint Chamber of Commerce. But the bottom line is that it’s difficult to carve out time and ample space for an alternative when the dominant system—which demands that you buy health insurance and make payments on your debt—is bearing down on you.

When asked about her decision to accept payment for her artwork in Bitcoins, Molly Crabapple volunteered that her financial success had given her room to experiment with economic decisions. “I have a kind of masochist work ethic and am financially comfortable, so it’s not hard for me to, say, make a pro-bono poster, even if I have to pull all nighters...
The seminal art critic Lucy Lippard summed up this issue poignantly in the 
February 2013 Brooklyn Rail (http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/artseen/a-different-one-percent):

The real problem is that ‘alternatives’ can only go so far when surrounded by a capitalist system based on very different values. Artists’ strikes on galleries and museums can be effective ‘actions,’ but scabs are always lining up around the block. Academia is not the answer. Freelancing is not for everyone; living frugally limits but does not exclude the risks of co-optation. The bottom line is that if artists/art workers can’t make at least a modest living there will be little challenging art.

I hate to think that the art world is doomed to remain a playground where anything goes until we exit into the ‘real’ world and have to pay our bills. But I suspect that real revolution (hardly in the forecast), not just ‘paradigm shift,’ is the only thing that would shake everything up enough to create true alternatives.

So, the question becomes: can an artist start a revolution?

If you posed this question to Caroline Woolard (http://carolinewoolard.com/), I suspect she’d answer “no” but qualify it: a single artist couldn’t, but a group of them just might succeed. Woolard is an artist, activist, and one of the founders of the aforementioned barter network, OurGoods; she also co-founded Trade School (http://tradeschool.coop/), recently set up an Exchange Café (http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1364) at the Museum of Modern Art, and is attempting to organize a Community Land Trust (http://eyebeam.org/projects/hacker-house-community-land-trust-0) for artists, hackers, and community organizers in New York.

Alternative models are, you could say, Woolard’s thing. In a recent conversation at the School of Visual Arts, where she was giving a talk, she explained some of her influences: her conscientious objector father and feminist historian mother (http://austinalchemy.com/); her time in art school at Cooper Union, which, until a recent, highly controversial change (http://hyperallergic.com/69520/the-end-of-a-free-cooper-union/), has historically been free for all of its students. “I was, in a way, radicalized because I saw another system, without thinking it was radical,” she said of her time at Cooper. “It just seemed mundane and obvious, because we were living it and practicing it.”

Soon after finishing college, Woolard and a group of friends built out a studio in Brooklyn, dividing up 8,000 square feet into thirty small spaces. The immediate goal was to make their rent cheap so they could make art, but it ended up being an experience of collectivity that profoundly influenced her. “The benefits of cooperating, in terms of intellectual and emotional
stability, were so huge, that I just wanted more artists to realize that power of pooling resources.

From there she had the idea for OurGoods, a barter network that lets creative people negotiate and exchange skills, services, and objects they have (research, writing, Vitamix) for those they need (help with electronics, a web designer, a truck or van). Woolard started the project in 2009 as a collective with four other people. Since then, it has expanded to include 2,000 users, received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and become an LLC nonprofit. It's now a radical system operating on a mainstream platform. OurGoods in turn inspired Trade School, which offers classes on the barter system.

It follows an open-source model: people in any city around the world can start their own Trade School using software offered by the founders and following an established set of principles (http://tradeschool.coop/start-a-tradeschool) (e.g. “Trade School is not free—we believe in the power of non-monetary value”). And they have: there are branches in forty-eight cities, from Flint, Michigan to Bangkok.

At the heart of all Woolard’s projects is a belief in the importance of collectivity and cooperative action. This, of course, runs counter to the dominant strain of American commercialism, which tends toward a capitalist-driven emphasis on individuality and aggressive self-interest, often under the rubric of “the pursuit of happiness.” These values filter into the art world not only through the market, but also with the increasing professionalization of art through MFA programs. As art critic Ben Davis writes in his “9.5 Theses on Art and Class” (http://www.benadavis.com/documents/9.5%20theses%20on%20Art%20and%20Class.pdf) (now also the title of a book (http://www.haymarketbooks.org/pb/95-Theses-on-Art-and-Class) of the same name), visual art has “an individualized relation to labor,” which “means that middle-class agents tend to conceive of their ability to achieve their political objectives in individualistic terms, with their social power deriving from individual intellectual capacity, personality or rhetoric.” Hence a lot of the economically, socially, and politically minded art one encounters today, wherein an artist shows up in a community, tries to help with some kind of short-term project, then leaves it behind.

**How do you move from paying for an extracurricular activity with an artist-designed local currency to reorganizing your larger economic life?**

For Woolard, the relationship between art and activism extends to the very conception and labeling of certain projects as art. “Most artists will participate differently in what they think of as an art project than they will in a service organization,” she said. “Obviously artists have big egos and are interested in visibility for their work, but I think the problem of participation by artists in each other’s projects has a
different trouble in the past twenty years than it would have before. If we say it’s an art project, a lot of people will say, ‘oh, what a nice idea.’ It becomes a representation."

That is, in a way, exactly how Mary Jeys describes the Brooklyn Torches: “Maybe it isn’t going to be a successful currency,” she told me, “but it is a thought experiment. A lot of what I’ve learned is this is mostly a dialectical project. Now I feel like I’m at this proof-of-concept (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proof_of_concept) place where it is another example of [the idea that] we can have agency in our economy.”

Still, it’s not clear where that agency gets you when you’re staring down five-figure debt. How do you move from paying for an extracurricular activity with an artist-designed local currency to reorganizing your larger economic life?

If there were a place to find answers to this question, it might be the Arts & Labor Alternatives Fair (http://whatdowedonow.info/), an event organized by the Alternative Economies (http://artsandlabor.org/alternative-economies/) subgroup of OWS Arts & Labor. The fair opened on October 18, at the art and technology nonprofit Eyebeam on West 21st Street in Chelsea. It was a Friday night, and as I walked down the industrial-feeling yet incredibly high-priced block, I felt the uneasy coexistence of two different art worlds. Well-heeled guests gathered at the entrance to the Paula Cooper Gallery for the opening of an exhibition by the conceptual artist Sophie Calle; next door, more than a hundred crustier and seemingly more earnest types filled Eyebeam’s warehouse space. When I arrived at the fair at 7:15 p.m., the majority of people were sitting, talking away, and nodding vigorously in small breakout discussion groups on a variety of social issues.

Titled “What Do We Do Now?” the event gathered a relatively wide range of organizations representing alternative economic models—from TimeBanksNYC (https://www.timebanksnyc.org/), a network for people who want to exchange skills and services using time as a currency, to Books Thru Bars NYC (http://booksthroughbarsnyc.org/), which sends books to prisoners. Although the following day would be more of a typical fair, with informational tables, Friday night was dedicated to kickoff events: two workshops and an open mic session in which people explained their projects to the audience in five-minute blocks.

After a brief introduction from a few members of the Alternative Economies group, the open mic began abruptly — with a long, low note on a baritone horn. The audience turned to the back of the room to see a stout man wearing a black beret. This was Jim Costanzo, the founder of the Aaron Burr Society (http://aaronburrssociety.org/aaron_burr_society_home.html), and he proceeded to make his way through the crowd, delivering a speech...
about the ills of capitalism with a kind of controlled beat-poet
inflection, notes from the horn and flourishes of his free hand
interspersed throughout. “Gold and silver are not money,” he said as he
entered the aisle, dropping a handful of coins to the ground. “The
people of Iceland are enlightened. Be enlightened. Google Iceland,” he
commanded.

Aaron Burr was by far the most dramatic of the presenters — nearly
everyone else stood at the mic and offered a brief overview of his or her
organization, sometimes with accompanying slide show. A man named
Vincent explained the Fixers Collective (http://fixerscollective.org/); a
woman named Rachel talked about the newly formed Art Handlers
Alliance (http://www.arthandlersalliance.org/). The range of projects
was pleasantly diverse, as was the crowd, in some ways. The room was
filled with people of all different ages and quite a few different races,
although I counted only three black people.

Throughout the night I found myself torn — struggling to balance my
inner liberal enthusiast with my inner skeptic, feeling alternately
energized by good intentions and disheartened by such moments as an
when artist took the floor and proclaimed, “Our objectivities are all
messed up in the age of capitalism.” Surely we need alternatives, and I
admire the people who step up to create them. But at a certain point,
after over hearing one too many people speak dismissively of “the
system,” it was hard to not see the event as a kind of parody of itself.

I spoke to a few attendees, none of whom seemed entirely new to this
world, all of whom seemed drawn to the fair for its potential to move a
scattered community forward. “I knew there’d probably be a lot of
different perspectives, a lot of different groups coming together, so it
wouldn’t be the same refrain,” said artist Stephanie Rothenberg, a tall
thirty-something brunette who works largely in digital media and
teaches Visual Studies at SUNY Buffalo. Rothenberg had the air of
someone who’s seen this all before but is holding out hope for a fresh
idea. “There are lots of layers to the post-traumatic economy,” a man
named Ben Lee told me. In his twenties, Lee had shaggy curly hair, wore
clothes that looked like they were about to slide off him, and self-
identified as a musician. “It’s about finding new ways to network,
instead of shouting at people and getting arrested,” he said. I couldn’t
tell if he was speaking from experience.

Their cautious optimism felt well-founded, even as questions filled my
head: For whom was this fair intended? What was its goal? I had
emailed versions of these to a member of the Alternatives Economies
group but a month and a half later was still waiting on, in their words, “a collective response.” Rothenberg had come to the fair with Sara Reisman, the director of New York City’s Percent for Art program and the bearer of an excellent asymmetrical haircut. The two made a good pair: one tall (Rothenberg), one short (Reisman), both seemingly more wizened to the difficult realities of making change than some of the bright-eyed twenty-somethings around us. “What do we do now, after Occupy?” Reisman mused. “I also have many questions about the efficacy of activism in the art world. A lot of the angst is really self-motivated.”

During our interview, Woolard had acknowledged the limits of many of today’s alternatives. “I think if we recognize that we need to find a way to reform government entirely and actually make coalitions with low-income people in New York, that’s when it could be radical. Until then, it’s really just upper-middle-class people applauding each other for, you know, maintaining their resources while everybody else suffers.” Was the Alternatives Fair one more example of back-patting, feel-good activism, or could the creative sparks that might arise there amount to something?

“As we think about this new society we’re building, art’s important because of creativity and imagination,” said Antonio Serna, an Alternative Economies member and fair organizer, during a break in the open mic. This echoed statements that both Woolard and Jeyzs had made to me, about artists’ unique position to help solve the enormous problems our society faces. Yes, the fair may have been jargon-and-trope-filled, but activism has to start somewhere, and it’s often with the people who have the resources, the inclination, and the time.

In Jeyzs’s words: “How do we change things? Artists have agency to say we can.”

Jill Stein

Jillian Steinhaus (http://jilliansteinhaus.com/) is the senior editor of Hyperallergic and a freelance writer living in Brooklyn. She’s contributed to the Los Angeles Review of Books, The Paris Review Daily, and the Jewish Daily Forward, among other publications. She loves tea, baked goods, and dancing, in no particular order.

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