



Four ways arts workers can win in the new economy

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Tap into arts-focused online platforms to access materials, administrative support, spaces and customers in a dynamic global economy.



Let's face it. Even before the sharing economy became a thing, artists were already at the forefront of it. During times of recession, revisiting the concept of ownership and solidarity is no longer just a hippies' quirk, but rather a Darwinian necessity.

Today though, the situation is definitely less straightforward than a simple 'I give you a sketch, you give me dinner'. The sharing economy is still a concept that exists somewhere between a functional economic system and social utopia.

While in this economy there are sometimes actual barter exchanges that take place, other times these exchanges are just a preamble to traditional transactions. Some other times what looks like a conventional trade-off, has a "humanity-enhancing" and "value-based" element to it, which counts for the idea of generosity at the foundation of the sharing economy. Or even, there are other times when those who offer something expect nothing in return. The spectrum is wide.

One thing is for sure, the identity of this new economy is still in formation. Technology has been a big game changer. The internet has enabled and eased up unprecedented exchanges across countries and people. While every platform has its own rules for the exchange, these individually impact the way artists work and their sources of income. Consequentially, the landscape for creative professionals is morphing. Here are some examples.

Sharing Network

Ourgoods (ourgoods.org) is a site which enables bartering at its simplest level. This resource-sharing platform facilitates exchanging of space, skill and materials. Users just need to register, make a list of haves and needs, and find a match with another user. From there, they go about helping each other on mutual projects.

While the website has been primarily designed for artists, it is also frequented by technologists, makers, farmers, and activists. "We would like to see every sector of the solidarity economy supported for artists and all low income people: artists credit unions, artists unions, artists barter networks, artists community land trusts, artists free schools, and artists working with all people to build everything," explains Caroline Woolard - co-founder of the site with Jen Abrams.

The founders acknowledge that creative people have been pooling and exchanging resources for generations. Nowadays, the internet not only makes swaps easier, but also enables community building. "More work gets done in networks of shared respect and resources than in competitive isolation. By honouring agreements and working hard, members of OurGoods will build lasting ties in a community of enormous potential."

Caroline, an artist herself, was one of the first to take advantage of OurGoods' network. "I had an idea for a glass sculpture, but I knew I couldn't make it myself." She found a glass-blower who needed help with writing a project proposal and she suggested an exchange of skills. "We traded writing support for glass-blowing. Because it takes years to become a glass-blowing expert, and because I have years of experience writing applications and grants, we decided that an hour-for-hour trade was fair"

Because of OurGoods' success, Caroline and Jen consider resource sharing as the paradigm of the 21st century. "We asked ourselves: What do you do with more arts graduates than ever in a networked information era and a Great Recession? You coordinate sharing online." With the platform they are committed to encouraging large scale change in the arts industry.

Arts management support

ArtsPool (artspool.co) is a not your traditional non-profit organization. What sets them apart is their cooperative approach, which helps artists and creative workers control costs, save time, and focus on what matters most. “Other arts service providers tend to be more focused on front-end support, in particular fundraising, marketing, and strategic planning. ArtsPool instead not only does certain work for its members, but has also honed in on back-end administrative work,” explain managers Sarah Maxfield and Guy Yarden.

ArtsPool was born to try make up for some shortfalls in the U.S. non-profit system - including dwindling funding and increasing regulation – and the redundancies of arts groups’ infrastructures. “What ArtsPool offers is a chance to share elements of that infrastructure (expertise, labour, and technology) focused on purely operational and largely redundant and transactional work making, savings arts organizations time and controlling costs.” they explain.

ArtsPool is easing short term, project-based hiring while providing better long-term stability for previously itinerant artists and art workers. “We allow a full-time worker’s excess capacity to be applied towards work needs elsewhere in the field (within the umbrella of the co-employment pool).” In addition, workers receive benefits through ArtsPool that they otherwise are unlikely to receive from the individual entities engaging them on a contract basis.

On an operational level, when workers are hired by ArtsPool to deliver services, ArtsPool’s management is responsible for monitoring their workload. Any member that hires a worker to do work directly for them is responsible for managing the worker. In either case, the worker has an agency negotiate the nature and amount of the workload.

Sarah and Guy see the work that the arts industry does as vitally important. “The industry experiences so many challenges that tie back to a lack of resources. There is no magic bullet to address that challenge, but we do see a collective approach to core administrative work as a viable and important part of moving toward a healthier industry.”

Housing and peer-to-peer connection

The organization ArtPrize (artprize.org), responsible for the namesake competition in the downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan, has often deployed itself in favour of the sharing economy. “We believe it to be a vehicle for innovation, community building, and sustainable practices that are both economically and socially beneficial,” says Erica Curry VanEe, an ArtPrize artist host and advocate for the new economy in Grand Rapids. “The sharing economy values highly the principles of reducing barriers and increasing peer to peer networks.”

During the annual 19-day event, ArtPrize helps match out-of-town artists with volunteers offering free temporary housing through the artist hosting program. This gives artists the chance to reduce the costs associated with participating in the event. Furthermore, the potential for artists to extend their stay in Grand Rapids is beneficial for the local economy.

The ArtPrize artist hosting program is quite different from a traditional residency. “While some artists will have experiences similar to an artist residency - for example help completing their work, help buying materials - the intention of the program is the basic needs of housing,” explains Jaenell Woods, public relations manager for Artprize.

“The added benefits of shared hospitality and life long friendships are icing on the cake,” says VanEe. “Throughout our years of hosting artists, we have seen the most ordinary of moments transform into the most exciting. From hanging drywall to making late night trips to Home Depot to eating Chinese, these are the moments that have connected us in community with one another, that have allowed us to enter into each others’ hearts and lives.”

New sense of ownership

While decisively embedded in a traditional economic system, art leasing is contributing to a new attitude toward art and the artists. This is the case with ArtMgt (artmgt.com), an art leasing web platform representing acclaimed artists, founded by David Frey.

Even if in the beginning art leasing can look like a compromise for artists, according to David it pays in the long run. “For artists, leasing is a trade-off for being paid incrementally over time, with the possibility of ultimately receiving more for their work in payments than if the work was sold outright.”

Art leasing provides artists with an additional source of income, which is based on providing the fruition and enjoyment of their work without having to give up ownership.

From a collector's standpoint, ArtMgt offers the opportunity to enjoy works of art in an affordable and risk-free way. “Some clients move forward with purchasing leased work, but others are most interested in the flexibility of having an art collection that rotates over time.” This shows that the company's success lies in the intuition that the sense of ownership for art is changing.

“In general there has been a great shift in the way people view ownership, whether that be with clothes, cars, real estate or art. Some of this change has been driven by new technologies becoming available for creating new platforms,” says David. “But in many ways these platforms are more a reflection on the increasingly nimble way of living that’s been facilitated by the technology that surrounds us.”

ArtMgt's founder is already seeing changes in the art world: “Technology will have an effect not only on the ideas and methods surrounding production, but will create new markets and alter existing conventions.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.