

# Making and Unmaking Collections through Gift Exchange: The Buy Nothing Project and Communities of Care

Sue Uhlig

The Pennsylvania State University

## Biography

**Sue Uhlig** is a Ph.D. candidate in Art Education at the Pennsylvania State University, where she has served as supervisor for student teachers in art education. Prior to beginning her graduate studies at Penn State, she was a continuing lecturer in Art and Design at Purdue University where she taught numerous courses in art appreciation, art history, and art education. She continues to work for Purdue as a limited term lecturer teaching distance learning classes in art appreciation. Her research interests include collections and material culture, sensory studies, and assemblage art, which she addresses in her art and art residencies.

## Abstract

**In this visual essay, I argue that the gift economy generated through the Buy Nothing Project is a form of community care. Specifically, I will discuss how members in the Buy Nothing Project helped to make and unmake a research-creation exhibition in a university project space through their commitment to community building. Founded in the US, the Buy Nothing Project is a global network of thousands of hyper-local community groups that eschew a tradi-**

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**tional cash economy and instead advocate collaboration, community, sustainability, and creativity through a gift economy. The generous gifting from my local group enabled the making of my research exhibition through the contributions of bookcases, tables, ephemera, and small boxes. Several of the Buy Nothing Project members also became participants in the research, and they lingered in the space during the exhibition and related events. On the concluding day during its unmaking, objects and furniture in the research exhibition were gifted back to Buy Nothing members to deepen the connection of community care.**

### **Keywords**

**Gift economy, community care, collections, collaborative exhibition, Wunderkammer**

This visual essay explores how a gift economy group enacted care through the community to support my dissertation project *Between Order and Disorder* and its two other iterations. In these research-creation projects, I investigate ways in which socially engaged, participatory exhibitions are dynamic spaces of co-created collections. The exhibition space is set up as a *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, which allows the collections to be in a state of continuously being made as participants add new objects, collections, and furniture (Figure 1). The unmaking of the project signals the end of the project during which objects are claimed or given to the public through a gift economy.

Within a gift economy, objects are given and received without monetary transactions, differing from a commodities-based system. Anthropologist C. A. Gregory (2015) identifies the dif-

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Figure 1. The Wunderkammer style of the research-creation exhibition *Between Order and Disorder*, 2018.

ference between gifts and commodities in that “gift exchange establishes a relation between the transactors, while commodity exchange establishes a relation between the objects transacted” (p. 40). Gifts are personal and qualitative whereas commodities are objective and quantitative. The care and connectedness shown through the gift economy structure, particularly in my local Buy Nothing Project community, was an integral part of my dissertation research exhibition. In this paper, I will introduce the Buy Nothing Project and its gift economy structure of giving, receiving, and showing gratitude. I next expand on the concept of reciprocity in gift economies and how it fosters care. I will then describe my research project, *Between Order and Disor-*

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der and ways in which adopting a gift economy built a community of care. Last, I will share implications of a gift economy for art education.

### **The Buy Nothing Project and the Connectedness of Gift Economies**

Founded in 2013 on Bainbridge Island, Washington, United States by Rebecca Rockefeller and Liesl Clark, the Buy Nothing Project began as an experimental, hyperlocal group that shared resources and aimed to bring about social change through the reduction of trash and plastic on their island community (Clark Rockefeller, 2020). According to Clark Rockefeller (2020), Buy Nothing is a philosophy of joyful living through being environmentally conscious in its pursuit of “every possible alternative before buying anything one wants or needs” (p. 3). The Buy Nothing Project also has the goal of building community with its members through the adoption of a gift economy.

What started as one hyperlocal group in Clark and Rockefeller’s neighborhood, the Buy Nothing Project quickly grew through Facebook, first blossoming throughout Bainbridge Island, then to the mainland of Washington state and rolling across the United States before expanding on a global scale. It now has thousands of groups around the world that support the gift economy and community building of the Buy Nothing Project. Members in each Facebook group must be local community members to realize the mission of neighborly community building. Members can post items on the site they want to gift, or they may ask for specific things; all gifts must be free from monetary constraints in the spirit of community generosity. The group’s philosophy is premised on three actions indicative of a vibrant gift economy: giving, asking and/or receiving, and expressing gratitude. Gifts can be material objects or gifts of service, and there are no limitations on quantity of gifts given or wishes asked.

Clark’s annual travels to Nepal with her family and an anthropological team provoked her interest in gift economies. In the small Nepalese village of Samdzong, Clark witnessed how

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the remote community in the Himalayans maintains a mostly cash-free economy. Each villager gives and receives needed items, and they may hold onto items they may no longer need until someone else needs it. Through an interconnectedness of the social network in the Samdzong village, residents also “communally care” (Clark & Rockefeller, 2020, p. 33) by checking on the health and well-being of all, to ensure that everyone is valued and has what they need. This idea that each person is a vital and contributing member of the community inspired the philosophy of the Buy Nothing Project.

### **Developing Care through Gift Economies**

At the heart of gift economies is reciprocity, and gifts are given in a mutual exchange of objects that establishes bonds and building relationships. Scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes of a shared gift economy through plants and people, experienced through the lens as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Kimmerer notes that in a private property economy, gifts are external to commodity-based transactions and are viewed as extraneously free with no strings attached. In a gift economy, however, Kimmerer notes that gifts are not considered completely free; the “currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity” (p. 28) and at the core of gifts are the corresponding relationships that continue. She argues that our relationship to the natural world is altered when we perceive it as a gift, and the health of all is strengthened when we treat nature - and each other - with gratitude and respect. Life is not about giving or taking. Instead, she argues, we are compelled to share in the dynamic, reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving, and in showing ongoing gratitude for the exchange.

Essayist Lewis Hyde (2007) agrees on the bonding experience that a gift economy fosters. He writes, “it is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection” (p. 72). While the exchange of commodities often terminates with the transaction,

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gift economies build foundations on which relationships and a sense of community continue to develop. Buy Nothing founders Clark and Rockefeller (2020) believe that “gift economies are at their most powerful [when]. . . we have both the new-to-us things, and we have new human connections” (p. 131).

Building relationships, establishing a sense of community, and developing deeper bonds are critical parts of gift economies, which lay the foundation for establishing community care. The reciprocity of gift economies also fosters creative work. Susan Gerofsky, Daniel T. Barney & Mira Gerard (2020) suggest gift economies are “a formalization of the processes of intergenerational care and learning” (p. 20) through the reciprocity of care/giving. They argue that in framing care through the pay-it-forward approach to a gift economy, the responsibility of reciprocating gifts can become a gentle nudge for creative work and for building a community where all can flourish.

### **The Gifts of a Collaborative Collective Exhibition**

My socially engaged project *Between Order and Disorder* consists of three different iterations. The first iteration was a summer residency in 2018 in a university project space in the United States which acted as a pilot study for the research exhibition. The second iteration was a short workshop held during a conference in Canada in 2019. The third and last iteration was a three-week research-creation exhibition in 2020 in the same university project space as the first. During each iteration, I developed a collective exhibition in the style of the *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities while I built a sense of community while participating in the gift economy of the Buy Nothing group (Figure 2).

Dating to the mid-sixteenth century in central Europe, traditional *Wunderkammer* were collections of natural objects, artifacts, scientific instruments, and curiosities, displayed in small cabinets or in large rooms of wealthy patrons that acted as microcosms of the world and

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Figure 2. Collections set in second-hand furniture to resemble the Wunderkammer in *Between Order and Disorder*, 2018.

functioned as both library and workshop to build knowledge and spark intellectual curiosity (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). The contemporary *Wunderkammer* functions to bring disparate objects together to create a dialogue between objects, juxtaposing them in new and often surprising ways. As a conceptual framework, Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson (2013) assemble objects associated with the women's liberation movement in Australia into an essay based *Wunderkammer*. They argue the contemporary *Wunderkammer* provides a feminist structure that can liberate things from a constricted past in addition to expanding the notion of what a *Wunderkammer* is and can do.

I adopt aspects of both the traditional and contemporary *Wunderkammer* in my research exhibitions in the conceptual framework and aesthetic design, which opens possibilities for a wide

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diversity of contributions of public participation, virtually and in person. With the design of the traditional *Wunderkammer* as a model, the project space is also transformed into a classroom, workshop space, and study, which invites participants to linger in the space to build, share, and contribute knowledge (Figure 3). The *Wunderkammer* also provides a structure to respond to, push against, deconstruct, limit, and move when building collections and in re/collecting objects and memories through human and non-human interaction.

The first exhibition in 2018 had fourteen slow, summer weeks to build. Initially, the project space was staged as a bare study, with a desk and books on collections nestled on bookshelves. Rather than buy or make new fixtures to display the collections that would have limited use and be an enormous waste of resources, I acquired secondhand furniture, such as shelving and tables from thrift shops and the university surplus store with a small stipend given by the project space. I carefully selected items that had spaces for setting various collections in and onto. I also curated the pieces to imbue the project space with an aesthetic of what I envisioned the *Wunderkammer* to be: eclectic, studious, vintage, inviting, and full of stories.

At the conclusion of the residency, I had to consider how to disperse of the furnishings, particularly since the exhibition was a collective gathering of collections and objects. I resisted consumerist practices of seeing collections as commodity. Whether the items were originally contributed by me or not, the premise behind the exhibition was one of collaboration and community. Selling items or hoarding collections for myself was incongruous to the notions of a community collection. Russell Belk (1994) suggests that once an item enters a collection, it enters a sacred space, and to sell it or see it as a commodity is unthinkable. What if objects resist consumerism not by keeping or hording them but by redistribution using a gift economy? Rather than sell the collections, which is typically done at the conclusion of an exhibition, objects in *Between Order and Disorder* were deaccessioned and given away in a variety of ways. Participants who made collecting boxes were able to take their items home if they wished. Oth-



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Figure 3. The exhibition was at once a Wunderkammer, classroom, and workshop space, 2020.

erwise, I made the remaining objects, collections, furniture, and second-hand objects available to the public, which consisted mostly of the university community in which the exhibition was set. I kept a few things, including collections that I created, collections from others that were gifted to me or were unclaimed, and unwanted furnishings. The conclusion of the exhibition

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was my first time in purposefully experiencing a gift economy. It was also my first exposure to the Buy Nothing Project. Because I still had a few lingering objects that weren't taken by the university community (Figure 4), the director of the project space encouraged me to join our local Buy Nothing group to post the few remaining items, such as desk chairs. From that moment on, the Buy Nothing group became part of my community in which I was invested not only in giving and receiving gifts but also for the blossoming relationships with its members.



Figure 4. The exhibition was at once a Wunderkammer, classroom, and workshop space, 2020.

The second iteration of the *Between Order and Disorder* exhibition project was an hour-long workshop during a conference in British Columbia, Canada in 2019. This workshop was

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a hands-on presentation of the research done so far and a challenge to create a temporary *Wunderkammer* of participants' collections within a conference room. Because this conference was thousands of miles away from home, I brought no furniture, no boxes, or no other items to help create the foundation of the collections-based exhibition. For this workshop, I relied on the Buy Nothing community in the university town where the conference was located. I requested to join the Buy Nothing group on Facebook with the caveat that I would be joining only temporarily during my time in BC. Once I became a member of the group, I explained my situation and asked for a gift of boxes and containers, and luckily, two members offered gifts of empty containers and boxes they had been saving for just the right occasion. I took a cab to their homes to pick up the items for the next day's workshop. They joyfully contributed items they had been saving for just the right moment, and they were excited to be connected with the workshop (Figure 5). Before leaving that Buy Nothing group, I posted photos of the resulting collection boxes (Figure 6) and expressed gratitude for the gifts and support I had from my short time with the group.

The third and last iteration of *Between Order and Disorder* was a focused three-week research-creation exhibition titled *A Return to Order and Disorder* in early 2020 which continued to build on the *Wunderkammer* theme. Social engagement with the public was crucial. I relied on the generosity of my local Buy Nothing group at all stages of the project. Before the exhibition started, I asked for gifts of things as well as gifts of service. I needed display furnishings, such as tables and shelving in addition to materials for collections-making workshops, such as boxes, multiples of objects, and paper ephemera (Figure 7). I also needed greater public participation for research and to build the collections within the exhibition, which meant participants needed to loan or gift their collections and participate in the research survey.

During its three-week run, I asked the Buy Nothing group for additional gifts of more participation, more collections, and additional objects, such as coffee mugs so I could offer fresh

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Figure 5. Boxes gifted by members of the Buy Nothing Group in Vancouver, 2019.

coffee to visitors in a mug they could keep if they wished (Figure 8). The space filled with objects and furniture as well as photographs and printed text from participant surveys to build the collective *Wunderkammer*. Over one hundred people participated in the research exhibition, and I conducted over a dozen workshops with classes, drop-in participation, and special group requests. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 80. Several people were repeat visitors and chose to do additional work in the space. Following the multi-layered participatory structure discussed by Pablo Helguera (2011), I designed the research-creation exhibition so that it offered differing levels of participation. According to Helguera, participation in socially engaged art can be richly layered and offer participants a spectrum of choice in how they want to



Figure 6. A small collection box created by a workshop participant, 2019.

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Figure 7. Gifts of boxes and furniture from the Buy Nothing group filled the space, 2020.

participate, whether the participation be nominal and passive, directed, creative in contributing content, or collaborative in co-creating content. In *A Return to Order and Disorder*, participants were able to choose the way they interacted with the exhibition in whatever ways they wanted or had time for. Some participated more passively and walked around the space, some participated in workshops as directed, others contributed their collections, while a few collaborated in the making of the exhibition or in its unmaking.

Of the hundred formal participants who took the research survey, only a few were part of my local Buy Nothing group, but over two dozen members of the Buy Nothing group participated informally through gifting objects during the making of the exhibition and by being recipients of gifts during its unmaking. A few Buy Nothing members participated in the research survey

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Figure 8. Gifts of furniture and mugs from the Buy Nothing group created a feeling of community, 2020.

and were repeat visitors to the space. Not only did they bring in collections and participate in my survey, but they also supported my public programming, lingered in the exhibition space, talked with other visitors, and attended the closing reception. As Kimmerer (2013) proclaims, “a gift creates ongoing relationship” (p. 26). Relationships were established during those three weeks that have only deepened through continued gifting and other social engagements (Figure 9).

The exhibition was in the process of being made up until its last day. The closing of the exhibition commenced the unmaking of the exhibition, and all the display furniture and some of the collections were returned to the gift economy (Figure 10). After three weeks of being the recipient of the generous gifts from my community, I reciprocated and was able to offer

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Figure 9. Near the end of the exhibition, the space filled with objects and collections while still functioning as a workshop, 2020.

objects back to the community, redistributing objects to college students and faculty in addition to my Buy Nothing members. After the exhibition ended, I expressed gratitude to those who participated in a post in the group Facebook page.

### **Unmaking as a Reciprocal, Caring Exchange in the Gift Economy**

The title of the first research exhibition project *Between Order and Disorder: The Making and Unmaking of a Collective Collection* and the second *A Return to Order and Disorder* are inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" (1936/1969). In the essay, Benjamin discusses the "dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order" in the life of the collector (p. 60). In choosing these titles, I wish to draw



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Figure 10. At the conclusion of the exhibition during its unmaking, objects are being prepared to be gifted to the Buy Nothing community.

attention to the dynamic energy of building a collection. When something, like a collection, is made, something else is being unmade in the process. And so, in the continuous action of making and unmaking, the collection is simultaneously ordered and chaotic.

Ted Purves (2014) applies the notion of that dynamic energy to the critical exchange in a gift economy. “A gift offered in the midst of the transgressive act not only destroys, it also creates. What it creates is the existence of something altogether different,” which forms a community bond shared between giver and receiver, “who then becomes kin and neighbor” (p. 49). What started out as a way for me to unmake and deaccession extra exhibition furnishings by

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giving them away expanded into the making of the next exhibitions by asking for and receiving collections, participation, and workshop materials. The reciprocal cycle of receiving, giving, and gratitude created dynamic community relationships of support and care.

### **Conclusion**

Kimmerer (2013) observes that in the passing of gifts, their value increases with every exchange. The caring, critical exchange in the gift economy of Buy Nothing helped to build my research-creation exhibition *Between Order and Disorder* and its two iterations. At the core of the exhibition was a gift exchange of time, objects, and self. Co-creating and co-curating the collections together in the participatory exhibitions created opportunities for social engagement, and the collaboration in building the collection with others challenged the individualized, private practice of collecting to one that is a collective experience open to, with, and for the public. The conclusion of the exhibition signaled the process of its unmaking, and collections of furniture and objects were returned into the gift economy of the Buy Nothing group to further increase their value and deepen relationships through the reciprocity of gifting.

As an art educator, utilizing the gift economy of Buy Nothing was critical in not only building my research exhibitions but also in building lasting connections with community members. For the field of art education, utilizing gift economies allow for a reciprocal exchange of materials, art, and service with the community to foster deeper relationships with the school and surrounding community, establish community care, and bring about social change through reusing materials and reducing waste.

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