**Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative**

Dara Greenwald

Justseeds/Visual Resistance Artists’ Cooperative is a decentralized community of artists who have banded together to both sell their work online in a central location and to collaborate with and support each other and social movements. Our website is not just a place to shop, but also a destination to find out about current events in radical art and culture. Our blog covers political printmaking, socially engaged street art, and culture related to social movements. We believe in the power of personal expression in concert with collective action to transform society.

~ [www.justseeds.org](http://www.justseeds.org)

Justseeds Artists Cooperative originally began as a one person mail order business started by artist Josh MacPhee in 1998. MacPhee found that there were few venues for him to distribute his inexpensive political art and zines. As someone coming out of the punk scene the solution to the problem of both cultural production and distribution was always, do it yourself, or DIY. As his project grew, he began to distribute other artists’ work but his operations remained small with him packing envelopes in his living room and walking them over to the post office. As punk/DIY infrastructure began to become more institutionalized, a larger entity offered to take over his order fulfillment and thus he was able to outsource the shipping.

Even though some of his responsibilities had been lifted when he outsourced the order fulfillment, as someone who was critical of capitalist social relations, he was uncomfortable acting as a middleman between artists and buyers and in his role as a business person he felt that it actually wasn’t making sense for him to be administering all the work. He felt that it was important to begin experimenting with a different kind of community and economy, but as he said in an interview, “Since we still live under capitalism, it was also a business decision.” In June 2006, he sent out an email to many of the artists he distributed and/or had collaborated with asking if they were interested in forming an artists’ cooperative using the Justseeds name that he had been promoting for almost 10 years. Six months later, the company that had been doing his order fulfillment went bankrupt taking with it over $8000 owed to Justseeds. It was then that a decision had to be made: either Justseeds folded or it transformed into a cooperative. The latter is what happened.

Justseeds is now a twenty-three person, decentralized, artist run cooperative that is a cross between a producers’ cooperative, artisans’ guild, artists’ collective, and artist-run space. Members are geographically dispersed across North America from New York to Wisconsin to California, Montreal to Mexico City and elsewhere. This type of cooperative model is facilitated by the world wide web. Although order fulfillment takes place in one location (and is done by coop members), the main public interface for the coop is an on-line store, www.justseeds.org. The site also has artist portfolios and a blog.

All of the members are artists but also all had prior experience in a variety of collective and cooperative endeavors not necessarily related to distributing their artwork. Some had lived in housing coops or worked in cooperative food stores or had been involved in horizontal political organizing. Others had participated in bands and performance groups. Although the focus of Justseeds is different, these prior experiences contribute to the group’s cooperative process. Although the labor is spread out among all members, the members who do shipping, order fulfillment, and accounting do get paid out of coop funds. Decisions are made using a modified consensus process and all members maintain their individual art practices and can voluntarily participate in group-identified projects.

Members contribute a small start-up fee to participate and commit to producing a minimum of five sellable pieces of art per year to be sold on the Justseeds website. The artists name their own prices for their work. One of the advantages for artists to sell their work through a cooperative business model is their ability to control the profits. In a traditional gallery relationship, the gallery takes fifty percent or more of the money from sales. In newer models of on-line sites (where individual artists can sell their work), the site takes a percentage that the artist cannot control. In the Justseeds model, the artist gets fifty percent of sales and the other fifty percent goes back to the cooperative of which the artist is a member. Thus the artists get to collectively control the surplus value of their product. In Justseeds’ case, the coop meets at a once a year retreat and everyone together makes decisions on how that money is spent. Some of the money may go back into the business to make improvements, it may fund other social movement projects, or new collectively produced Justseeds projects.

Justseeds also does collective exhibitions off-line.
“Which Side Are You On?” A Justseeds collective exhibit at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
The 2008 portfolio project was about the prison industrial complex and was given out to groups working on prison issues for them to use as educational and fundraising tools. 2009’s project was about climate change. They have also worked with other social justice organizations developing graphics and posters. Various combinations of people in the cooperative collaborate with each other while each maintaining their own individual arts practices. These collaborative projects provide motivation and opportunities for members to learn more about each other and the collective creative process.

The Justseeds blog (www.justseeds.org/blog/) is another way in which a cooperative model can be beneficial to artists.
Instead of having to keep up on your own individual blog, with a cooperative of over twenty people anyone can make a blog post on the collective blog. Since the group is spread out geographically, the cooperative lends itself to networked communication. Through the blog, members can learn from and share with each other exhibition opportunities, personal stories, engage in critical debates about art and culture, and promote events in their areas. This format also allows for others not in the cooperative to engage with these same ideas, events, and opportunities.

In order to facilitate decentralized communications and decision making, Justseeds has been working with a political technology collective called riseup.net who have been developing Crabgrass, “a software libre web application designed for group and network organizing, and tailored to the needs of the global justice movement.” Crabgrass is a mix of social networking, wiki, and decision making software. The Wiki component facilitates easy to follow, focused discussions about specific projects rather than Justseeds members having to filter tons of emails each day. The Wiki also allows for the uploading of images so that coop members can share designs for promotional items or collaboratively create new images remotely or for them to share new work with each other for critique and feedback. The voting mechanisms help the decentralized group make decisions all year, not just at the once-a-year member retreat. Many of these technical capabilities are available with
corporate and propriety web services but Justseeds use of Crabgrass falls in line
with their mission of supporting other groups whom they share values with
including trying to enact new economies and cooperative values.

Justseeds is an experiment of artists trying to find new ways to make a living,
support each other, and support social transformation while also making hand
made art more accesible. Although not perfect, their efforts are an attempt for
them to be more connected to what they produce and how it is used in the
world while creating other forms of support with like minded people. While it is a
closed cooperative (they are still figuring out the optimum size of a cooperative
such as this), it is a new and flexible cooperative model worth examining.
Endnotes

1 Dara Greenwald is a media artist, writer, and curator. You can check out her projects at http://www.dara.greenwald.com/.
2 Although not a coop member, Greenwald often collaborates with MacPhee and Justseeds.