



## Small Gifts Nurture Friendships, Large Ones Nourish Hierarchies Georg Keller's Primitive Economies Series

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*"Give as much as you take, all shall be very well."*<sup>1</sup>

*"A business that makes nothing but money is a poor business."*<sup>2</sup>

When we travel abroad, be it far or near, we fill our wallets with the relevant currency—and maybe also pack a few bars of chocolate, best of all a well-known make but not one that you can buy anywhere and everywhere. Even if Western society is far from a gift economy, all kinds of everyday gestures and acts still bear the hallmarks of earlier kinds of transactions. The chocolate is intended to fulfill the same function as the gift offered as “bait” in archaic cultures in the hope of prompting a return gift. That initial gift awakes a need, creates trust, and establishes a relationship that might later prove to be advantageous. In early societies cocoa, salt, tobacco, tea, spices, and much more were used as currency.

Georg Keller's group of works *Primitive Economies* (2016) explores the ethics, rituals, and valued objects in gift and barter economies, in cultures without coins or bank notes. During his work on this group Keller consulted texts by ethnologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), reports by social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) on life in Papua New Guinea, Siberia, and North America, and conducted his own research in Japan. The prerequisite for any reciprocal exchange is trust and consensus that peaceful giving and taking is ultimately more productive for all those involved. The first step is for both parties to lay down their arms: negotiation instead of altercation. This is symbolized by the discarded spears in Speere (“Spears,”). Keller made the tips of the spears from translucent resin, thus combining a constitutive gesture with the modern notion of transparency, which has become a buzz word (or empty formula) in contemporary politics and business alike. The simplicity of the presentation, with its echoes of *Arte Povera* and *Land Art*, points to that elementary act.

Besides this prerequisite for exchange, *Primitive Economies* also addresses the storage of accumulated wealth and looks at magical, non-tradable objects and exchange rituals. Yam houses and kura buildings serve as repositories for valuable items. On the Trobriand Islands (Papua New Guinea) the yam, a root vegetable similar to the sweet potato, is not only a staple food; it is also used as currency and as a ritual object. The yam house stands in the center of the tribal village like a bank and contains the entire yam harvest of all the villagers. However, this “safe” is not protected by steel walls and reinforced doors but by its very transparency and openness. These open-sided, log-built structures are distinguished by their

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1 Maori saying, quoted in Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, Abdingdon: Routledge, 2002, p. 71.

2 Henry Ford, Mansfield, Ohio, 1965

painted patterns and decorations. Keller's Yams House has undergone a process of abstraction. The "logo" on the roof combines an organic form—perhaps a schematic yam—with stripes running from lower left to upper right. The colors and direction of the stripes may look ethnographic but are in fact inspired by bank logos.

In his work—for instance in *Logo – Georg Keller Unternehmungen* ("Logo – Georg Keller Enterprises," 2009) and *Warenhaus* ("Department Store," 2012)—Keller frequently draws on a collective fund of images, on the familiar emblems, colors, and forms that certain companies and institutes claim as their own. He thus casts his mental nets wide at the same time as pointing to the encoded, through-designed nature of our environment. How is something represented? How is it imbued with which meaning? Design—ubiquitous and subliminal—steers our perception and interpretation of the world. It only catches our attention if it infringes its own rules.

Unlike the light, wooden structures on the Trobriand Islands, Japanese kura are especially stable structures, which were traditionally used to store not only foodstuffs but also other valuable items, such as gun powder, ceremonial clothing, and religious texts. The model for Kura, which Keller discovered in Tokyo, contains kimonos. These precious garments serve as investments that can be loaned. Keller presents them as treasure gleaming in the darkness: the ultimate treasure trove. The size and finish of a kura reflect the wealth of the family that owns it. These structures are status symbols, like the copper plaques that symbolized the prestige and position of indigenous chieftains among the tribes of the North Pacific coast of North America. At the same time these coppers were also regarded as talismans or magical objects, "family members" with their own characters, names, souls, whims, and wishes. During the course of the gift-giving ceremonies—or competitions—known as potlatches, the Kwakiutl also distributed portions of coppers. The number of potlatches a copper had "survived" and the subsequent reconstruction of its fragments increased its value.<sup>3</sup>

The welded joins in the *singende Metallplatte* ("singing metal plate,") look partly like scars that tell of past events and partly like a line drawing. The latter becomes one with the protective cover. Fracture lines and the materials of the plate and the cover give the object a haptic quality that directly appeals to the viewer's sense of touch. A desire to reach out and to own, to touch and be touched are as closely connected in consumer societies as they are in the world of talismans.

The special necklaces and bracelets of the peoples of the Trobriand Islands are also talismans to be treated with great care. In the islanders' system of ritual exchanges, the Kula, shell necklaces and bracelets are passed around the ring of islands, clockwise and counterclockwise respectively. This both creates social connections and allows more people to share in the islands' wealth. Gift economies around the world have developed some highly complex systems of wealth distribution. Besides the Kula ring (ritual, cyclical exchange) and the potlatch (competitive, ceremonial generosity and extravagance) there are also other systems, such as the *Tauschzelt der Chukchi* ("Chukchi Exchange Tent,"). The Chukchi Inuit in Siberia have devised a mechanism that rotates like a carousel and randomly distributes gifts all around the tent.

<sup>3</sup> In the early twentieth century the Lesaxalayo coppers were exchanged for 9,000 woolen blankets, 50 boats, 6,000 buttoned blankets, 260 silver bracelets, 60 gold bracelets, 70 gold ear rings, 40 sewing machines, 25 gramophones, 50 masks. See Mauss (as note 1) p. 133.

In his *Primitive Economies* Georg Keller has created pictorial objects and installations referencing special rituals, procedures, evaluations, and ethics. While two oversized items of jewelry describe a circle in the space, the Chukchi tent is the size of a doll's house. Keller translates the constituent elements of gift and exchange economies into his own artistic language. He abstracts, reduces, toys with proportions, and crosses alternative currencies and archaic rituals with Western concepts and emblems, transporting them into the here and now. In this process particular importance attaches to craft skills, textures, and materials (wood, ceramics, resin, plaster, brass, fabrics).

Alternative currencies have a beauty of their own and, for all their simplicity, immense appeal. They have an aura, unlike our own money, which—alienated and mass-produced—has no value as such. Walter Benjamin described how works of art lose their aura when they are reproduced by technological means and detached from their original context: “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.”<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin's conclusions with regard to film and photography apply equally well to money. As soon as money is detached from the world of magic and minted or issued in large quantities, it ceases to have any value; the exchange of goods shifts from a ritual, moral transaction to a mechanical transaction. A gift creates and sustains relationships. It signals appreciation—unlike trade and business transactions, where the main focus is on satisfying needs and desires.

The contemplation of other systems casts one's own in a sharper light. Marcel Mauss followed his descriptions of “primitive” societies with a plea for greater generosity and spoke out in praise of early welfare systems,<sup>5</sup> which have since become highly complex distribution systems, albeit with not a shred of magic. Keller's art is not finger wagging; it simply points to the fact that there are other systems that are also financially viable, create surpluses and wealth, and—by virtue of their principle of reciprocation—see greater “value” coming into circulation than exists in real terms at any given moment.

As auratic objects these alternative currencies have parallels with works of art: they have an intrinsic beauty and are often puzzling. Their value exceeds their purely commercial value; they can also serve as status symbols and are generally kept safe very carefully. The magic of these alternative currencies, their beauty and simplicity resonate in Keller's *Primitive Economies*. At the same time these works not only question our prevalent notions of trade, values, exchange, and profit, they also highlight the importance of creative production and of value systems in the art world. What do these economies, these ways of dealing with money and distribution say about the world in which they are deployed and practiced? What does our own kind of money say about Western society and economies? What changes when talismans circulate instead of bank notes? In the Western world there are also status symbols that denote wealth and establish hierarchies. They are generally protected and cultivated—they are rarely redistributed. They also lack any real religious-magical qualities. Nevertheless, in fairytales and even in our own daily lives, there are numerous echoes of gift economies, such as the bar of chocolate given in a gesture of friendship, which—as a means of spreading happiness—very definitely has magical properties.

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4 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 211–44, here p. 217.

5 *The Gift (Essai sur le don)* was first published in 1923/24.