

FERAL TRADE

WWW.FERALTRADE.ORG

BACKGROUND

Feral Trade, by the artist Kate Rich, is a public experiment in trading goods through active social networks. The word 'feral' describes a process which is wilfully wild (like a pigeon) as opposed to romantically or rural-wild (wolf). In this process, goods are passed from hand to hand, travelling between diverse social settings determined by the routes individuals can potentially travel. The products are traded in the UK and worldwide through social, cultural and occupational networks, harnessing the surplus freight potential of recreational, commuter and cultural travel for the practical circulation of goods. New products are chosen for their portability, shelf-life and capacity for sociability: Feral Trade goods in recent circulation include coffee from El Salvador, grappa from Croatia, tea from Bangladesh and sweets from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

The main activity of Feral Trade is the trade of groceries via the agency of people that the artist or her friends know. This trade can either take the form of direct transactions or in the form of the Feral Trade Café, where the produce is prepared and served to the public. The design and production of product packaging documenting the process is also an integral part of Feral Trade, with a view to rendering details of source, shipping and handling with the micro-attention that ingredient listing labels normally receive.

FUNDING

Through trade, talks and workshops, social networks

DEVELOPMENT

Started in 2003

LOCATION

Bristol, UK, 587,400 inhabitants

CONVERSATION

This conversation with Kate Rich was held in June 2011 in her kitchen, waiting for a delivery of coffee beans fresh from the roaster.

Bianca Elzenbaumer: What sort of work were you doing before starting Feral Trade? How did your paths through life lead you to start such a long-term project?

Kate Rich: In the '90s, I was living in California and working with Natalie Jeremijenko as the Bureau of Inverse Technology. The Bureau was formed as an anonymous group, a kind of guerilla intervention into some of the massive changes we were witnessing at that time, triggered by the emergent techniques and technologies of the Information Age. We were trying to make sense of this social and technological change, and also make out where it was coming from. Computers were beginning to mediate every aspect of life, but there was no clear authorship of that technology. It was just all there, forming tools that did not have any apparent history, geography, ideology or any legible accountability to them. So that was the logic around us as the Bureau, forming a similarly unreadable, unaccountable, un-authored, mysteriously-numbered group in order just to try to process this new information and work out how to respond to it.

We started out in Melbourne, but then moved to California because it was the place where a lot of this stuff was being produced, where this immaterial new tech was being materially constructed. We were there for about four years and produced several iconic pieces of artwork: we flew a miniature drone over Silicon Valley to bring back an aerial image of the Information Age. In range of the Golden Gate Bridge, a tourist icon but also less well-known as a suicide icon—people travel there from all over the US to jump off—we infamously set up a suicide detection camera. We did an unauthorised install of an information system, a vertical motion-triggered camera that would capture an image when something vertical passed through the frame, producing a continuous image-stream of all falls from the bridge. Officially, information about the suicides was still gathered in the age-old manner of counting the bodies the coastguard fished out of the water, while at the same time, in other areas, financial market indexes for example, information was becoming increasingly segmented, made live, monitored, fractionally updated. So the Bureau was trying to apply the logic of information-gathering that was happening in economically profitable areas to the social world.

Around the turn of the century, I felt a real urgency to back away from producing work on computers and at that time I moved from California to Bristol in England. I got a job as volunteer bar manager at the Cube

Cinema, which is a volunteer-run, unfunded cinema, music and art venue. It was here, through running the bar and the very practical necessity of sourcing bar supplies, especially coffee, that I became a trader. At that point, in early 2001, I had come to Bristol with no backing, no connections. I knew only one person in Bristol, Heath Bunting, who invited me to come down to the Cube and only through that did I meet more people. My capital at this point was actually the social networks I brought with me, from a decade of living and travelling as a media artist—I saw these as “computer-formed” social networks, which was the big change that had happened in the ’90s: you could really form and maintain social networks basically through e-mail. So I decided to combine those two things, my own network capital and my job at the Cube, by trying to secure a supply of coffee for the bar using just my social networks. Also at that time—there were the anti-globalisation protests going off in Seattle and London and Genoa—I had the suspicion that global trade wasn’t this terrible thing, that it can’t be all exploitation and problematics: this is political, but there are many versions of trade.

Bianca: Did you have some experience in trading before you started Feral Trade or was this something completely new you started?

Kate: No, not really. I had just been in the media art world, which means that you are never paid anything but you get flown around all the time. There was this whole circuit of symposia and exhibitions with always just enough money in them for an airfare, a hotel room and food. You could see how the funding would ultimately go into the airlines and the business sector. So at that time, I was travelling a lot at other peoples’ expense and I would go grocery shopping and bring things back as gifts for friends. That was a normal social instinct. So in a sense, that was the level I began trading from.

With the import of the coffee for the Cube Bar, my friend, artist Amy Balkin, had recently brought me some coffee from El Salvador, where her sister was working in the US Peace Corps. That is where it started: I began to wonder if I could trade the world number one commodity—after oil—simply through my social connections. So I e-mailed Amy, who e-mailed her sister, who put me in touch with a Peace Corps worker in the village of San Pedro Nonualco and I persuaded him to mediate between me and the local coffee co-op. I hadn’t imported anything before and the co-op nor-

mally sold their green beans directly on the national market and hadn’t ever exported roasted coffee. So, we had to figure out how to do it at both ends. In the end, they drove to their nearest airport, I drove to my nearest airport and the first shipment of 25kg coffee was successfully delivered by air freight. From then on, I sold self-imported coffee at the Cube and also to a network of friends and acquaintances. From there, it has evolved very naturally into a project because I realized it focused a lot of my interests. I’ve expanded the product line to include seasonal, temporary and more perilous products, such as fresh sweets from Iran, couscous from Morocco, carp from Montenegro—all sourced through either people I know personally or through someone I know who knows someone. So the producers are somehow arrived at entirely through social connections and all my customers also turn up via extended social networks. Not Facebook, but actual, physical social networks—I certainly don’t know everyone personally that I buy from or sell to, but it is always the case that someone I know does know these people personally. This could sound like a closed system, but actually, if you think of social networks, you go one hop away from yourself and it is completely different: my friend was trading the coffee with his bank manager and I was using it to pay my mechanic. People’s parents are often involved and it is actually simultaneously a very loose and a very strong social grouping. And, by the way, people’s parents make great couriers, they are quite dedicated because their offspring are involved. So they are very fast and reliable. (laughs)

Bianca: So how can I imagine the flows of your trade? Does all the produce flow through your flat?

Kate: Yes, it more or less does now. I was using the Cube as a base for a long time, but, for the last two years, this is the space I use. Occasionally things don’t actually come here—I can coordinate a shipment that will go directly from the source to the destination, perhaps via other places, but generally this involves a lot of warehousing. It is “Not-In-Time Shipping”, which is as reliable as DHL, which means that I’ll reliably get things there eventually. Today is, for instance, the second day I am waiting at home for a Parcel Force courier delivery, so that is exactly what I mean by “reliable”.

Bianca: When this question of reliability comes in, how do you deal with money and risk in your project?

Kate: I pay up front so, for me, it is all risk. With everything, I pay up front, so I have no guarantee that anything will arrive and I can't be sure of the quality until I get it. I do everything I can to assure good quality because, in a case like mine, the trader becomes the quality control. As an independent trader, it is you who needs to maintain the value because if a thing isn't good or if it isn't there, I can't sell it. However, certain defects can add value to my shipment. For example, if the coffee has been knifed open by the customs agents, it adds a little caché to it and people like that. The border authority do this because if it is a small amount, you are immediately under the commercial threshold of credibility, whereas if you are shipping thousand of tons, no one touches it. It is all my own money I'm gambling. A lot of the trade process is about finding couriers and finding warehouses for transshipment, as shipments don't always go from A to B directly—they go via wherever someone is travelling. The best 'warehouses' are small cultural organisations where people work with some kind of public interface, like a small gallery or a magazine-editing office. There, they are used to people turning up all the time. I wouldn't normally send someone to someone else's private home if they don't know each other. Going to these slightly public spaces is also about the added value for the participants. You get more: you get a social interaction, you get some kind of rendezvous. So that is what the network is designed around—connections between nodes—and I map all these in my database, which archives every shipment.

Bianca: Did you create and use that database from the beginning, already having certain aims in mind?

Kate: At the beginning, I was writing everything down on pieces of paper and it got really chaotic, to the point where I thought, I should just get software. Looking at commercial inventory software, I realised it didn't have fields for courier reports and all the other data that I was interested in. This meant that I had to write my own software, which brought me back to what I was trying to get away from: computers and the internet. So, I've built my own database in a way that means it could handle the information and also work as the public interface for the project. Online, people basically see my inventory—that's the whole website. There's one 'About' page and then a live inventory. It is like going on DHL but here you can track everybody's shipments. In a way, this is a kind of restructuring

of information which is similar to what we were doing with the Bureau. And the database also generates maps. I can, for instance, ask the database to output a map of everywhere the sweets have travelled. So you start seeing the social connections behind the project.

What I want to do next is to train the database to make this info more interesting, so I could map all the airports used in Feral Trade routes, or any shipments that involved a parent-child relationship, for example. What I have is eight years of data—it's all in there, I just need to figure out how to query it. Again, this is capital. It is also why a long-term project is really important, so that you get the depth of time coming through it. In the art cycle, you are supposed to make something and show it for a year or two and then everyone is saying, "What is your new project?". I actually put myself in a difficult position by only focusing on Feral Trade. People always want to hear about your new project, but what I try to do is increase the granularity, the research, the products and the relationships. So I am actually much more a trader than an artist because this is what you do in business: you don't develop a brand-new business every time, cutting the connections to your previous one—you improve your existing business.

With these maps, I'm trying to prove and demonstrate a form of social networking that is not the Facebook story. What I maintain is that this data is not harvestable in any valid way. For a start, it is not scalable—this is not multipliable by 20,000. The social networks I have experienced clearly demonstrate that they don't scale up: I have more or less the same number of social connections all the time. People come and go. Sometimes my mules overlap with my strong friendship groups, sometimes they don't. I have a couple of hundred people in my database, but the number of active ones stays about the same. Social networks depend on actual social relationships: physical, load-bearing, actuated social networks. Every shipment on my maps has happened—it is not some speculative idea. Stuff has been carried in bags, through airports, not dropped, not lost—scaling this up materially is satisfyingly impossible. It is not a model based on stripped-down efficiency. Sometimes, one bag of coffee will travel in a bag on a plane to Australia, so of course there is a whole flight for that one bag of coffee. But in actual fact, there are other people on the plane, I'm going for other reasons, there are other things in my bag, so it's loading. It is a rich-shipping medium, not a stripped-down one. I'm working on a model of commerce that has a completely different value-set to

efficiency-based, competitive capitalism. I'm still barely into articulating what that is exactly, but this is the work I'm trying to do. I'm not inventing anything, I'm simply articulating it in a particular context and trying to understand it.

Bianca: Does Feral Trade then also work out for you financially?

Kate: No, but as a business I'm doing really well. I'm not in debt, like most businesses. So I'm actually successful with the business, in that I make a mark-up on everything. This is a reasonable business model, except that I don't have the scale and still make a lot more money talking about the project than selling things. I prefer the money from the trade, but actually I'm making money talking. Again, I can't do this massive, petrochemical injection of scale into it because it is always based on real social networks. For example, I got this coffee from the farmers in El Salvador. I bought their whole 2010 harvest for 2,000 British Pounds and this was all the coffee they had. I could sell more coffee than I can get at the moment. But I'm just letting it happen at its own pace. When you don't exploit your vendors or your customers, the ways in which you can leverage your income are limited. That's out of balance with the economy we live in.

Bianca: From time to time, you also set up the Feral Trade Café in cultural venues. How does that work and how does it fit into the project?

Kate: To date, I have installed the Feral Trade Café three times in galleries and I think it actually doesn't work there. People don't go to galleries. People could come in from the street and buy a coffee, but they don't. I think it did work for the staff, and people used it as a meeting space, but it needs to be a slightly more commercial or more public context for there to be enough of an atmosphere to make it work. In a gallery, you just feel awkward, you are in visual mode and it feels strange. The café I did that I found was really successful was the one in Newcastle at the AV Festival. They invited me to do the coffee and food, so I took over a cinema bar which normally serves Coca-Cola and popcorn. They got a food license for the ten days and their staff worked for me for that time. I stripped out all the stock and replaced it with my stock and we were making green toasted wheat, couscous porridge, Mexican tortillas, rose water drinks. I spent the previous month amassing produce—having the deliveries coinciding in

time and in space was a real challenge but I had a budget and was able to dedicate my work to bringing things in. That café ran for ten days and it was the main meeting place of the festival. I fed everyone: the visitors, the festival staff, the other artists and the general public. It was the perfect interface because I would have people who would come in deliberately and other people who would come in and ask for a Coke and have to deal with the change of menu. I made a decent amount of money running that as a food venue. When you are selling something by the bag, you don't make much markup. If you sell it by the cup—that's with coffee—you make a fortune, everyone does. With these public interfaces, you can actually make a living out of them and also transmit the work, if you set them up right.

Bianca: When Fabio and me first met you at the Alternative Schools Symposium in Liverpool in 2010, we found it great how in your talk, you openly addressed the issue of financing your life. Is this something you usually do in your presentations?

Kate: The question about money is somehow the number one question I get when I go and talk in an art school: how do you survive? In a way, my project is all about that—all my finances are online. You can see everything that I did in the invoice column. If you read it for that, you can see the financial structures behind it—you can actually see when the money goes into hotels and travels. The database is showing all that. And supposedly it is not a subject you should be talking about, but I just always found that really fascinating and haven't had any problem with it. It is like health. Health is a very key part of the public individual and, generally, it is not acceptable to discuss it in your public life. Generally, someone with a health problem will just retire from public life for the duration and then appear again. The same with economic issues, and this just seems meaningless to me because it is just absolutely part of the context. I've always found it bizarre that you go to these conferences on alternatives, open source and this or that, and then there is the coffee break and you are drinking and eating corporate catering, sandwiches and crisps served to you by a middle-aged woman who has absolutely no social connection to the event and who is not invited. Everyone looks straight through her, like she is not there. This discontinuity between content and context I've always found supremely irritating, so I sort of force my way into that gap by offering to do both the presenting and the catering. Which is hard work.

Bianca: In Liverpool, the catering you did consisted in serving home-made Cube-Cola. Could you tell me more what is behind that product?

Kate: Cube-Cola is a collaboration with Kayle Brandon, who is a Bristol-based artist. It is one of the products I trade in Feral Trade and I just happen to also be one of the people to make it. Cube-Cola began in 2004, when we were both managing the bar at the Cube and, again, it came out of a very simple bar stock issue. There was always this argument at the Cube, even before our time there: should we serve Coca-Cola at a DIY-culture, independently-run arts venue? So we bought Virgin Cola but politically this makes no difference. At various times we tried not to have cola at all, but we serve the public and when people come in to see a film or a band, they want a Coke. Having to say no all the time was really stressful for everyone. So it was just one of these pragmatic, socialized decisions. We had been running an open-source computer network at the Cube, and online, I came across an open-source cola recipe and wanted to give it a go. Kayle joined me, we tried the online recipe and our first batch kind of worked, but took a whole day to make. Then we tried again and again, for in fact three years, but the emulsion of the water and the essential oils—the flavour oils—kept on failing. In the end, after having asked lots of people for advice, a friend's cousin—high-level food scientist from India—came to the UK and we had a meeting with him. This was extremely illuminating and we finally broke through the knowledge barrier and started being able to produce Cube-Cola on demand. Every month or two, Kayle and I meet and make a batch of cola concentrate, something like 300ml. This is very concentrated so is enough to make about 120 litres of cola. It's the reverse-engineering of a major commodity. It has been a really instructive project for us, and every now and then we are invited somewhere to do it as a workshop to take people through the process with us. With this project, we've been turning over just enough to pay for our ingredients, but for 2012, we're planning to gear our distribution up a bit, expand the business experiment and become more like a small, hand-managed cola factory. We are not proposing that you go home and make everything in your house on your own, but it is a hopeful tunnel to another world.

Bianca: So is Feral Trade, with all the trading, talking and exhibiting involved, sustaining your life or do you need to do other work for a living?

Kate: At the Cube, I now volunteer to do the accounts, from my interest in money and systems. I do a bit of paid IT work, but generally I string it together out of artist talks and occasional commissions and royalties. Somehow, incoherently, that holds things together, but everything is tightening up at the moment so it always feels like, now the money is run out, and then it isn't quite, but I'm braced for change over the next few years. Academic money from talks is a serious part of my income. I don't do that many, but I also don't need that much money to survive, but with academia cut savagely in so many countries, that will significantly hit my type of economy. But I'm ready for change. The Feral Trade project is also a sort of training system for working without expected infrastructure, working with whatever infrastructure is there. In a sense, I am trying to build up the kinds of networks that will move with change.

Bianca: Is there some fear about the future involved in living this way?

Kate: In the last few years, I've had a lot of health issues and my insurance against that is living in a country that has got national health system. That is why I would never move back to the United States. I am not waiting for retirement to do the fine things in life, like travelling. I am doing that all my life, integrating travel and how to really live and having direct experiences in my life so that I don't have this kind of expectation to do it at the end. There are so many sad stories where someone saves up and gets struck down by terrible illness one year after retirement and dies. So, as I don't store possible experiences up for the future, I can't imagine my life changing a lot when I get older. I will still be concentrating on how to subsist well, personally and socially. My ability to work will not change very much until I hit about 80 and, at that point, I think that my interest will be in good socialised, collectivised methods of suicide, rather than to worry about which care home I am going to get banked in. For me, it is really all about housing security and having the right not to move. I was living in a truck on a public street for the first eight years in Bristol which allowed me to save money to buy this housing association flat, so in that respect, I should be safe now. It is also about health security. I have friends in the States who spend as much on their health insurance as on their rent because they are forced to—not out of choice. One friend just had a baby and, despite being on the highest level of health insurance, got charged \$3,500 for having the

baby. Not living in those conditions is pretty important. Most of my economy is really gathered from other social resources. At the Cube, while no-one gets paid to work there, we have a cinema, a music auditorium and a public programme which are extraordinary assets; there is the computer network, office resources and we share a car, plus there is the network of other people and their skills which is an inestimable asset. I could do a budget of my life where most of my income is actually externalities like the Cube, my own social networks, the Avon Gorge—which runs through Bristol and where I spend as much time as possible—and the National Health Service. You could probably add that up to, say, £36,000 a year, together with my other income. I'm not interested in going through the conversion to cash though, but just actually working out how to be able to access resources directly.

www.feraltrade.org

www.ptechinc.org/cola/cola-lab.html

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