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ByJJ King

Thomkins Square Park, New York. The pungent odour of fresh garlic saturates the nearby atmosphere. A bright orange truck marked in large letters with the words 'Trade for Garlic' is attracting the attention of passersby. They stop to examine its contents, harangued by the traders who stand by the truck exhorting members of the public to 'get garlic!'

At different rates, people begin to comprehend that they are being asked to trade their personal possessions for bulbs of organic garlic. They search themselves and their bags for things to exchange. Lively bargaining starts up. One man removes his shoes and leaves, barefoot, clutching five fat garlics; a cigar trader offers three of his best for three bulbs; a restaurant across the road offers dinner for two in return for 20 good cloves that they will be able to use in their kitchen; a woman writes out an original poem – price, three garlics; three month's webhosting is exchanged for the sum of 15 garlics. And so it goes on. Before long, it seems that the entire locale of Thomkins Park is saturated with garlic; everyone seems to be clutching a bulb or two in their hands as they go about their weekend business.

The reason for this invasion of garlic into New York's East Village? Shu Lea Chang, and her 'Garlic=Rich Air' project, styled after Argentina's El Club del Trueque ('The Exchange Club'), a network of informal trading collectives which use units of value called 'creditos' to allow for the barter economy that has been established since the collapse of the Argentine economy and the devaluation of the peso. The Rich Air project uses garlic as the 'gold standard' for its own 'credito', with one credito pegged to a value of 30 cloves of organic garlic.

While online garlic traders use Thomkins park's WiFi access to trade creditos over the net, the street-based garlic traders calmly explain to members of the public the back story to Cheang's project: that the demise of the world economy has led to the establishment of garlic as the basis for a new economic system. People have little trouble understanding the idea. In the context of the dot com shakedown, the fiscal wobbles following 9/11, and the 'accounting problems' plaguing huge multinationals like Enron and WorldCom, it's not difficult to imagine that the current system might not last too much longer. What could be more timely, then, than practicing barter-style systems of exchange that may take the place of government-backed currency in the future? And, after all, what could be a tastier, healthier standard for barter than a nice bulb of organic garlic?

Garlic=Rich Air took place in locations throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn from 27-29 September. All the garlic was grown and picked upstate by the artist and her team [<http://www.rich-air.com>]

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