

Cooperative Journal Podcast

“Solidarity Economy Shorts” in collaboration with New Economy Coalition
Solidarity Economy Shorts #5: Artists as Organizers with Creative Wildfire

Featuring:

Lily Xie: Artist and Creative Wildfire 2023-2024 grant recipient

Lizzie Suarez: Artist and Creative Wildfire 2023-2024 grant recipient

Ebony Joy: Host

[Music - Solidarity Economy (Riddim) by MADlines]

Ebony: Welcome to Solidarity Economy Shorts, a collaboration between New Economy Coalition and Cooperative Journal Media. Solidarity Economy Shorts are conversations with frontline organizations and individuals that are putting solidarity economy principles into practice. They're using different strategies to build an economic system where communities are meeting their own needs outside of Capitalism.

New Economy Coalition is a member based coalition representing the solidarity economy ecosystem in the United States. Their members are actively working across economic sectors to shift from individuality and capitalism, to cooperation and solidarity.

Some of the New Economy members will be featured on this podcast to explore land rematriation, cooperation, worker ownership, arts and culture, resource mobilization, and more. We'll share lessons learned, practices, and how you can engage in this liberatory vision.

As you listen you're invited to feel into your body. When do you sense constriction? When do you feel light and expansive? We hope these shorts can be a reminder that we don't have to wait for the future we dream of, it is here now waiting for us to participate.

Creative Wildfire supports artists and grassroots organizations to create art that fuels our movements and imagines the world we need to thrive. This cultural organizing project is an embodiment of the strength of coalitions to resource the wider web. Three powerhouse organizations in the movement for a Just Transition and the Solidarity

Economy pooled their budgets to redistribute to artists - we call them the trifecta - Movement Generation, Climate Justice Alliance, and New Economy Coalition. Each iteration has been a little different, adapting to the needs of the movement at the time. First there was an in person retreat, round 2 was a cohort that funded artists to make art inspired by the Creative Wildfire manifesto about not going back to normal after COVID. Robin and I were among the grantees.

Then the trifecta invited me, Robin, and Micah (an amazing artist from the inaugural retreat) to design and steward the next iteration. Shout out to the trifecta for modeling how to trust artist-organizers to lead and be woven into strategy rather than as an afterthought.

In 2023-2024, we convened a 10 month cohort that prioritized deeper relationship building, co-creation with a partner organization, and political education. Seven incredible artists and seven organizations were selected to explore what's possible when we shift from transaction to collaborative liberation.

In this episode I speak with Lizzie Suarez and Lily Xie, two of the most recent Creative Wildfire grantees. We talk about their roles as artist and cultural organizers, challenges that arise when collaborating with organizations, what can symbiosis look like when artists and orgs co-create, the value artists bring beyond being producers, and the cultural shifts needed to have a just transition in the arts.

Ebony: Hi Lily and Lizzie, welcome to the podcast. I'm so grateful to be sharing space with you again. Last time we were in the beautiful mountains of California and were able to be in the physical presence of each other. I'm so grateful that we got to do that with Creative Wildfire, even if it was at the end, it was a beautiful culmination. I'm really excited to have you on the podcast to share with the world a little bit about who y'all are as amazing artists and organizers within the solidarity economy, social justice movement, just transition, all of these things that Creative Wildfire tries to activate and allow people to dream into through art. I would love for y'all to introduce yourselves and just share what is your role as an artist and organizer and the forms of creative expression you choose.

Lizzie: I can get us started. It's so nice to be in space with y'all through zoom after such a lovely weekend. My name is Lizzie Suarez. I use she and they pronouns, born and raised in Miami, Florida, unceded territory of the Tequesta, Seminole, and Miccosukee peoples. My role is primarily a visual artist, I do digital illustrations. I'm also the communications manager at the Miami Workers Center, we organize working class,

Black, and immigrant tenants, workers, women, and families, to improve the conditions and issues that affect their lives. I think how I kind of see my role is to weave together what I see are the challenges, the visions, the desires, the dreams of our communities. I use my skills, whether it be tactical skills like illustration, art, image making, or more on the narrative strategy, visionary, kind of dreaming big sense, to advance real life campaigns and projects that everyday people are working on to make this world a better place.

Lily:

Nice. Hell yeah Lizzie. Lizzie is so awesome. Hi everyone, my name is Lily Xie. I am here right now on Lenape land in Philadelphia, but I have spent the last 10 plus years in Boston on Wampanoag, Massachusetts and Nipmuc land. I'm an artist, I right now mostly do animation. I do stop motion animation and also many other forms of making and being a creative person. I've been really lucky when I was in Boston to have really learned from and built with a lot of folks in Boston, Chinatown, a lot of working class immigrant residents and also grassroots organizers, moving around things like housing justice, preserving culture in Chinatown, environmental things, things like that. It's been really dope to learn from people, to be able to collaborate together. Things change a lot so it's really, as an artist, I think about my role as sort of participating in the magic making of movement work in whatever way that means. Sometimes it's just showing up to things, sometimes it's helping move all the chairs after the event, sometimes it's doing animation or video, whatever way, whatever shape that takes.

Ebony:

I love Creative Wildfire for its weaving in of both the artist and organizer, that they are not distinct, that they don't have to be distinct. I think that it also embodies the responsibility of an artist in the world. That we are organizing people culturally, mentally, to shape our material conditions in a different way or maybe it's reinforcing a narrative, like reinforcing the narrative of capitalism. I think a lot of the individual artist trope does enforce that and so I'm always so inspired by the ways that you all and other artists that we've worked with weave both of those and really are rooted in the communities that you're in and clearly your art is informed by that, they are not separate.

One of the ways we tried to do that with Creative Wildfire in this iteration was to bring artists into organizations to collaborate and create art that was about hidden histories. I know that there's limitations to orgs working with artists, it can be financial, it can be capacity. These are all things that we've noticed through this process. So I would love for you to maybe talk about some of the challenges that come up between artists and

people that see themselves just as organizers, the organizers in these organizations that you either worked with through Creative Wildfire or in other contexts.

Lily:

Yeah, for sure. I feel like there's such a long lineage of artists being in grassroots movements. I feel like there's just so much precedent over many, many years of artists participating in movement, leading movements in so many ways. Creative Wildfire was such a special opportunity to be able to participate in a way that was very structured. I felt like you, Ebony, Robin, other folks, helped give us a lot of guidelines for how artists and organizations can collaborate together. That was really great, because I feel like one of the big challenges is knowing how to collaborate, going both directions, like as an artist, knowing how to collaborate with organizers or people or whoever, and then vice versa, for those folks to know how to collaborate with us as artists.

I think I had to learn a lot throughout the years. I was personally really lucky that folks that I met through Boston, Chinatown, already had experience working with artists and had their own idea, like what Lizzie was saying before, of what a narrative or a cultural strategy would look like. So I felt like I could sort of slot in and learn from them but that's not true for everyone. I think a lot of folks are really concerned with just the day-to-day reality of fighting whatever fights they're working on or getting people's very basic needs met, and maybe haven't had time to think about, or energy to think about cultural strategy, narrative strategy. So I think sometimes, as an artist, I feel like, sometimes I've wondered, what's my role here? Sometimes in those situations, my role is not necessarily to be asserting my creative self. Like, sometimes people really do just need people to knock on doors, people to deliver meals, or take folks to the hospital, or whatever. So I think that presents some challenges in how we're told that artists should be. We're told that artists need to always be producing artwork, artists need to be making unique works of art. I think in movement spaces, that's not always what artists need to be doing. So I think there's like outside pressure that we should be acting a certain type of way and I think that has in the past made me feel kind of internally challenged. I think the reality is that there's sort of other things happening when you're an artist, working, collaborating in movement spaces.

Lizzie:

Yeah, I would say, pretty similar to what Lily offered. On the artist side, I've come across challenges of knowing how to collaborate is really important. I think often as artists, I mean for me, when I'm drawing, it's very much like a meditation practice. For me, I'm really thinking intently about the subject matter, the details, and so it can be challenging to think about, well, this takes me so long to draw this illustration. What

does it look like to collaborate with a group of 20 people? How do I integrate people into this practice?

I really want to uplift a group, Josh and Rachel of Look Loud. I'm always like the Look Loud evangelist. I always laugh because they're a really beautiful example of the balance that artists have between their expertise as artists, knowing when to acquiesce control over a project and knowing where to bring people in. So something I really admired that they do is that they'll have sessions with organizations to land the messaging, what does the imagery look like, what is the core message that we want to display. They do a lot of visual strategy, the images that you see in the streets, they'll design it. It's not like, we're going to invite people who have no visual drawing skills to draw, but it's like, how do we integrate people into this practice that makes people feel like they are meaningfully contributing? It's not a feeling of like a little kid, we'll put your drawing on the fridge and then forget about it. But it's like, how do people feel like they meaningfully contributed to something? It's something that comes up for artists.

I think on the organizer side, part of what being an organizer means is understanding that every person needs to be able to find their role in an organization, in a campaign, in a movement. So thinking of people who are really shy, maybe they don't want to knock on doors, maybe they don't want to make phone calls, maybe they have really beautiful writing skills, maybe they have journalistic skills. So part of the challenge is naming the roles that organizations need to thrive and be like, fully encompassing the diverse skills, backgrounds, and knowledge that our communities hold, and being skilled to guide people into finding what their role is and what they can bring to a movement.

I think what comes up is organizers know they need art and culture, but are stumped often about how to integrate it. So again, I want to uplift, I think it was called Forward Together, they put out this guide 'Building Irresistible Movements', a guide for organizers and artists of how to collaborate together, a kind of framework to experiment with. I've felt really inspired by different groups like that, that are beginning to think about, like Lily said, such a long history of artists in our movement, artists being embedded in the work, in the community. It's really important also to document these things so that this is not just by word of mouth that we're learning, but we can also have tactical tools and things to build off of and experiment with.

Ebony:

Yeah, I agree that artists have been doing this for so long, artists have been at the foundation of movements. I think also what has expanded my vision of what that can

look like beyond posters, has been helpful through this Creative Wildfire process that actually there's so many other mediums we can use to do that. Even Lizzie, you did a poster, but there were also other elements that you wove in, like calls to action, where it wasn't just something beautiful, but a way to activate people to do something next.

I also really value the way that we tried to bring in artists from the beginning, we didn't want this to seem like just a commission where an artist was brought in for a specific thing, but that it was this co-creative process and honoring that the artist also has a vision in the strategy. I love that you uplifted Forward Together 'Building Irresistible Movements', I'll definitely link that in the show notes, because it really just gives concrete ways that orgs can honor artists.

I also want to hear from y'all, what are the ways that you would like to see a symbiotic collaboration with movement orgs? How can they prioritize and better support artists? Maybe you can share specific stories that come to mind.

Lizzie:

I'm happy to share. So this is where I boost up my friends who are really incredible artists in movement. They recently formed not a formal organization, they're cultural workers, so they are artists, they're screen printers, they're popular educators, all these things. They recently formed a collective called Caribe Pouvwa, which means Caribbean Power here in Miami, and are currently experimenting with a multi series workshop to teach young people in Miami the history of Miami in the Caribbean with an anti-imperialist lens through screen printing workshops, and they often collaborate. They recently collaborated with the Miami Worker Center for Domestic Worker Assembly. They helped us screen print our campaign images onto bandanas for workers to wear and adorn themselves with at the assembly. They've collaborated with We Count, a worker center in a rural region of Miami, Dade County that organizes with agricultural workers and farm workers to create altars to honor the lives of outdoor workers who have lost their lives to extreme heat and lack of work protections. So that's an example to me, of a very symbiotic collaboration, where the individuals of the collective have relationships with people and organizers in organizations, and then often for free, for just exchanging, trade, whatever materials resources we have. It's very much based on the relationships that we have, offering the skills and saying, hey we have a campaign we need art for it. Can you come in alongside members of our organization, alongside the workers? Can we paint banners together? What ideas do you have as artists that we can improve our campaign about? It's an exchange, rather than, like you said, a commission.

So for me, I think the ideal symbiotic collaboration is one where the artists are familiar with the community. The artists are place based, they know the issues, not because they're maybe directly impacted, but they have solidarity. Something I want to name is, it's really important for artists to see themselves as workers as well, to not see ourselves as separate from the issues that maybe we are helping organizations create artwork about, but a lot of the precarity in our industry as freelancers is very similar to that of, let's say undocumented domestic workers who don't have a right to a written contract as well and are kind of figuring it out just as we are.

Lily:

I love that so much Lizzie, I feel fired up hearing you talk about it. I feel like that's so on point about these different movement spaces, helping artists realize their solidarity in many different ways. I think that's really dope and love you lifting up your friends. I love this question, Ebony. I think when I think about how movement spaces or movement organizations can support artists, I think a lot of the same things that Lizzie mentioned come up. I think in my experience, I felt so grateful for organizations that have development or financial resources, when they're able to just shift resources to artists, I think that can be some of the most powerful things they can do. Obviously, not every movement is set up like that, that has fiscal sponsorship ability.

I've been very lucky working in Boston, that there have been organizations like, Asian Community Development Corporation I worked with a lot, Chinatown Community Land Trust, Pao Art Center. These are all organizations that I think have shifted resources directly to artists which is very special. Now having met folks in the Bay like Movement Generation, I think they're doing the same thing. I think, obviously movements are underfunded, artists are also underfunded. I think artists as individuals especially, it's been hard to organize artists so I think it's been hard to raise capital, raise resources, without doing it on, like an individual by individual basis, scrapping for stuff in that way. So yeah, I think when organizations are able to just redistribute resources, it's dope.

Just emphasizing what Lizzie said about political education, I feel like that has been such an important part of my journey. I don't come from a traditional arts background, I don't have a BFA or whatever but I think even if you did, you're not learning about these things. You're not learning about organizing or political aspects of art in most of these traditional arts training environments. I feel just super grateful to have learned from other organizers or other artists too, and to share in that kind of political learning. In Creative Wildfire, we also had these really important to me, sessions of political education, where I learned what Just Transition was, and all of these things. So I think that that's really special and powerful and has I think contributed a lot. It's sort of like,

you know what folks are talking about, like this cyclical feeling of for me as an artist, it's really enriching to to learn about the movement, to learn about my place in it, and then it makes me better equipped also to give back or to be in solidarity in that way.

Lizzie:

I want to add an example, because what you were sharing really reminded me of how I even got into movement, it was through art. So I think artists who want to participate, show up and offer your gifts. I began to go to a book club that leftist artists in my community were holding, and then I just showed up and started doodling what I was learning. As we do as artists, just like always kind of like lowkey making art that we just call doodles. Other people start to notice, and then it becomes oh Lizzie, can you do our flyers?

Showing up, bringing who you are, offering what you can. Sometimes organizations don't really know what they need more of until someone comes in and shows we need chant leaders for sure. It's so refreshing when someone shows up to a march and is impromptu leading a group of people in a chant, and showing people things. We don't really know how to name these things until we show up in our authentic selves. I think for people who are like I have a skill, I don't really know where my role is in an organization, I think just experiment. Not every organization is going to be for you, but just feel confident in the skills that you have and know that there's definitely a role for it.

Ebony:

Yes, it makes me think of this space in New York. It's called Performance Space. They actually, before the pandemic, it didn't end up doing its full term, but they hired artists to be on their team, so that they could know the depths of their organization, see where there are gaps, and see where they can show up and fill in those gaps. Also thinking of redistributing money to artists when possible, even if an organization doesn't have a large budget, another example that came out of New York was the Cultural Solidarity Fund, different smaller organizations in New York pooled their resources to give out emergency \$500 grants to artists during the pandemic. Even if an org doesn't have money, maybe they have space, maybe they have materials that they can share with artists. Or like you were saying, their labor, their time, to support art projects. So I think that there's ways that we can be creative, even if there isn't money to have this symbiosis relationship between artists and organizations.

I'm also wondering, what do you want people to know about artists beyond the surface level, beyond artists just being producers, what do you want people to understand?

Lizzie:

I wish people understood that art or really whatever creative element that it is that you want your organizing projects to have, it shouldn't be an afterthought to the organizing strategy. It's also not always about the product, a banner, a poster, or flyer, but it's also like the process, the magic that happens when people come together to contribute to something creative. I think not only about, let's say traditional spaces, like an art build and we're making signs together, but also the process of organizing involves a lot of trainings, a lot of political education, popular education. So it's like, what can popular theater or collage making offer to your training about workers rights or what happens if you get an eviction notice, or what does it mean to organize with your neighbors that maybe, like a 30 page slide deck doesn't offer? This is why I really love what I've been able to learn by reading Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, because it's a lot about games and play is how people really learn, especially people at different levels of education.

It's very challenging to have a one size fits all, way of raising consciousness of people. I think art is not just about we need a flyer for this, or what are our signs going to say, but also, can we design a visual game for people to understand civic education, how the local Board of Commissioners works, or city council. What are the different ways that we can be more creative in our organizing that actually makes people feel like this is the meeting I want to come back to. This is a meeting I feel comfortable inviting my cousin to, my neighbors, like high levels of participation from as many people involved in the project is what we as organizers, we strive for, and I think finding, the spot, the special sauce, the magic sauce, whatever it is, integrating creative arts, creative play into it is like really what makes that kind of stuff possible.

Lily:

Definitely, definitely, yeah, I was really struck by your question, Ebony, because what you said about, like what do you want people to know about artists beyond what they can produce? It reminded me, I feel like I've been thinking about that a lot recently, and I saw someone posted this image. I'll just read what it says, I feel like it was really sweet. It says, "it's pretty shitty how baseline human activities like singing, dancing and making art got turned into skills instead of being seen as behaviors. So now it's like the point of doing them is to get good at them, and not this is a thing humans do the way that birds sing and bees make hives." I've just been thinking about that a lot recently, because I feel like yes, art, art strategy, narrative strategy, cultural strategy, these are

the ways that we get to where we want to go, but they're also where we want to go themselves. You know what I mean? I feel like to be able to make art, to be able to sing, dance, draw, and all of these things, that is our liberatory future. Like, that's what we're trying to get to. One of my mentors named that to me in a really important way. I remember many years ago because I was saying to her, I was like, I feel like it's not enough, like doing the art isn't enough. She was reminding me that actually when we do the art together, that's a little piece of the world that we're dreaming about, a world of a more liberatory future, we're experiencing a piece of that world when we do that. So yeah, I think that's powerful to me.

I think it makes me think about all the different ways that artists not only move us towards that future, but create that in the everyday. Like artists who are doing really radical stuff, like making joyful experiences, finding ways to be provocative, or undermine systems using art or whatever. I feel like that's a different way that we can think about art making. I'm still figuring it out also, but just thinking about the different ways we can think about art, like you said Ebony, beyond just what we're trying to produce.

Ebony:

Wow, I love both of your answers so much because yeah, movement meetings can be boring as shit and it also can be just for a specific type of person, like how a specific type person can learn, it can be very heady, and then it keeps the movement very niche. It doesn't allow this opening for other people to learn and find genuine joy in a space which is necessary, considering this is difficult work, and so how can we bring play into that space.

Lily, you just reminded me of how there was no such thing as an artist before, it was just inherent to us, like as children, being creative is inherent, and eventually it became something that was commodified. I feel like the people that choose to be artists are embodying this liberatory vision, not just through the art they're producing, but actually just in their being, like choosing, at least for some artists, not to embody the status quo, and to really fully give yourself to being a creator, which is what we're supposed to be on this Earth to do, like once capitalism dissolves. Even through the pandemic, what did people come back to when they weren't working, it was creating and being in community. So I think artists just remind us of how we are as human beings.

So you already started to kind of project into what the world can be like when we do shift to seeing artists beyond producers and living out this Just Transition or Solidarity Economy. What do you feel like are some of the cultural shifts that maybe you didn't

name already in order to transform capitalism into this vision. You can also speak to what that could look like specifically in your creative field.

Lily:

This is so hard, this is so hard. So many things need to happen, it's so hard to identify one thing, or even to name something specifically for artists, when I think everything's so interconnected. I guess when you were talking about in our own field, I was thinking about animation, which is going through kind of a moment of reckoning in crisis right now because of the labor conditions for animators. I'm not really a professional animator, like, I don't work for Disney and stuff. But I think across most artists fields, I guess people are feeling the pain points of the exploitation of workers and land that's happened for many, many years. That's kind of like culminating right now with the rise of AI, which is the exploitation of unpaid workers and land that's being extracted from. So yeah, hard to say one cultural shift, but I think the main thing for me, kind of, going back to what Lizzie was saying earlier about solidarity, is really just seeing all the things that we need as artists being really bound together with all the things that we need as human beings. More broadly, I think our fates are really tied together and with the fates of workers especially. So yeah, I feel like there's just a lot of interdependence going on.

Lizzie:

Yeah, I'm in total agreement. Artists, those who don't already like to see themselves as workers, see themselves as part of the labor movement, I think should do so. I'm thinking about the amazing art of the 60s or 70s that we really admire, thinking back to what was the cost of living like, artists had rent stabilized apartments, were paying maybe 100 bucks or so a month to live, and be able to just live and make their art.

We can't think about how to be our most creative selves without also thinking about the material conditions that make it possible for us to be able to do that. I think, for us who freelance, or for people who are not tied to a particular employer. There's so many other workers in industries like that, like in the gig economy, workers who are undocumented workers, there's other industries where people are experiencing similar challenges, where it's difficult to organize because we're not all sharing the same employer. I think we have things to learn.

So I think in terms of cultural shifts, artists not just focusing just on the art making or image making, but also as workers. What is our organizing strategy? Who are the strategists in our field who are shifting what does it look like to have an inside, outside

strategy for artists, where it's like, we're trying to change policy. I think a guaranteed basic income would be a huge thing for artists, not just artists, but for artists in particular, to be able to have the funds to to have breathing room, just as human beings, to have time for leisure, time for family, time for for hobbies, but then also to just be able to to live and work with dignity.

I think for a Just Transition in our fields, I would love to see more cooperatives between artists. I would love to see us coming together to create our own models and experiment with. They may not all be successful, but I think they're all worth trying out. I think of what's happening in the music industry now, Lily mentioned it in the animation field, I think the threat of AI is very, very serious, not just on our ability to find work, but also on the land. We can't think of our fate separate from the land, how much water and energy it takes just to have like one Google AI prompt is obscene. So just seeing ourselves as all interconnected, and experimenting with different models. So going to the music industry, like, what would it look like for the recording artists to have their own union? What would that look like? Those are things that keep me up.

Ebony:

Thank y'all for these beautiful visions and I know it's such a hard question to answer, because so many things need to change. Like you said, Lily, they're all intertwined, artists are actually not separate. I think that speaks to what you were saying, Lizzie, to honor artists as workers, we shouldn't be this separate entity.

I also want to plug a couple things, because you mentioned guaranteed income, and I just want people to know that there are things that exist, although this is ending this year, but Creatives Rebuild New York was a program where artists were able to receive \$1,000 a month, no strings attached. They also did something really interesting, where artists were paired with a local organization and they received a salary and health benefits. So if people want to learn more about that, I could put a link in the show notes too to this course Creative Study about that.

Also in terms of co-ops, I know Ashanti, who was a part of the Creative Wildfire cohort, is a part of something called the Cartoonist Co-op, and that seems like an amazing organizing space for illustrators and cartoonists to build solidarity with each other, like they're supporting each other on crowdfunding campaigns, and just being a platform where people can source cartoonists across the world.

Also want to plug Shelterwood, where we stayed for our retreat, because they are intentionally bringing artists to the land and I think that is so core to not just healing the land but ourselves and realizing that we are in deep interdependence with it. Something that they're amazingly doing is just giving a couple of fellows that they have a living salary to heal and learn with the land. That's it. That's the only requirement. So I hope for more spaces like that, where artists can just come and be and connect with each other and the land, and also strategize on ways that we can create our own systems that are less reliant on capitalism. So thank you all so much for inspiring me always.

Lizzie:

Thank you so much for having this conversation. I feel like it's so special whenever I get to be around or in spaces where we're talking about the intersections of arts and organizing. Love to see more of it and happy to be part of the Creative Wildfire project.

Lily:

Thank you, Ebony. This is such a great conversation. I always learn so much from you and from you, Lizzie. This is so beautiful.

[Music - Solidarity Economy (Riddim) by MADlines]

Ebony: There are many ways you can be in reciprocity with us. If you are or know of a collective model that aligns, let's connect so we can spotlight the story. Share episodes, especially with your friends and family who aren't aware of collective models but are unfulfilled with this economy. With your support, we can continue archiving the stories that aren't being elevated but are necessary for our collective elevation.