After Scarcity

By Austen Tucker · 2026

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If campfire logic describes how creative culture survives, what kind of economy can support it now that scarcity is collapsing?

The market model is dying. It is not being murdered. It is encountering a condition it was never built to survive.

That condition is abundance.

Here's what the first three essays built. AI is rabies for capitalism: the system is thrashing because scarcity, its core assumption, just broke. The tension around AI echoes what photography triggered in painting, what the printing press triggered in manuscript culture. The line moves. The community adapts. The art keeps getting made.

The lone genius myth was invented to serve the art market. Not artists. The workshop model predates it by centuries. Attribution was a guild convention. "Who made this?" became the only question that mattered when dealers needed scarcity to justify prices. Preciousness is a market strategy, not a creative value.

Campfire logic is how creative culture survives. Pass it around. Let it change shape. The song belongs to the circle. Fan communities, folk traditions, jazz musicians, workshop artisans, con sketch artists: they all knew this. Museum logic replaced it, not because it was better, but because it was profitable.

Now the profitable model is breaking. Not because anyone attacked it. Because the tools changed.

You cannot enforce scarcity on infinite reproducibles.

This is not a political argument. It's a structural one. The gallery system works because paintings are physical objects. There is one original. Copies are identifiably inferior. Provenance can be verified. The recording industry worked because distribution had chokepoints. Pressing vinyl costs money. Bandwidth costs money. Someone controls the pipeline.

AI removes the chokepoint. Generation is instant, free, and runs on consumer hardware. The cost of producing an image dropped from hours of skilled labor to seconds of electricity. The cost of producing a story, a song, a design: same trajectory. You can legislate around this. You can platform-policy around it. You cannot reverse it. The capability exists. It will not un-exist.

The commission economy as it stands is built on the same scarcity assumption. This artist's style is unique. Their time is limited. Their output is finite. That creates value. But when a model can approximate any style on demand, the scarcity of style evaporates. The artist is still real. Their skill is still real. But the market mechanism that converted skill into price just lost its floor.

This is not a moral failure. It's a market failure. The system was designed for a world where creation was expensive and distribution was controlled. That world is over.

So what replaces it?

Not nothing. The art doesn't stop. It never has. The question is what economic and social infrastructure we build around it now that the old infrastructure has lost its foundation.

Campfire logic points the way. Not as nostalgia. As architecture.

Gift economies are real. They predate market economies by millennia. They work on reciprocity, not transaction. I make something. I share it. You make something back. The value circulates through the community, not up to a platform. The convention artist alley already works this way. The five dollar sketch is not priced to reflect the artist's skill. It's priced to keep the exchange moving. The relationship matters more than the receipt.

Patronage is real. Not the Medici kind. The modern kind. Patreon, Ko-fi, tip jars, community subscriptions. The model is: I support your practice because I value what you do, not because I'm purchasing a specific deliverable. This works. It works right now, for thousands of creators, across every medium. It's not a utopian fantasy. It's an existing parallel economy running alongside the market model.

Community patronage is real. A Discord server that pools funds for a shared artist. A fandom that crowdfunds a zine. A convention that subsidizes artist alley tables. The infrastructure exists wherever people decide that supporting creation matters more than owning the output.

The con sketch is real. Eight minutes. Ten bucks. A badge that means more than a gallery print. The value was never in the object. It was in the moment, the connection, the fact that someone sat across from you and made something that only exists because you were both there.

I'm not naive about this. And I'm not sneering at artists trying to survive.

Working artists face real economic pressure. Rent is due in dollars, not reciprocity. The transition from a scarcity market to an abundance economy is not painless, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest. Artists who built careers on commission income are watching their pricing power erode in real time. That's not abstract. That's groceries.

But the survival model was already brittle before AI showed up. Platform dependency, algorithmic visibility, race-to-the-bottom pricing, clients who ghost after the sketch phase. The commission economy was never a stable system for most working artists. It was a hustle that worked for some, failed quietly for many, and enriched the platforms that brokered every transaction. AI didn't break a thriving ecosystem. It accelerated the collapse of one that was already buckling under its own contradictions.

The solution is not to pretend AI doesn't exist. It's not to legislate scarcity back into a system that has structurally moved past it. Every attempt to enforce artificial scarcity on digital goods has failed. DRM failed. Paywalls leak. Copyright enforcement online is a game of whack-a-mole that platforms play only when it's cheaper than not playing.

The solution is to stop organizing creative culture around a market model that was always extractive and only ever worked for a small elite. The gallery system served gallerists. The recording industry served labels. The commission economy, at its best, served individual artists. At its worst, it created a race to the bottom where artists competed on price for algorithmic visibility on platforms that took a cut of every transaction.

That system was not sacred. It was recent, and it was breaking before AI showed up.

The art keeps getting made. It always has.

Before the market. Before the gallery. Before the copyright office and the recording studio and the platform economy. People made things and shared them and the things changed hands and changed shape and nobody called it theft. They called it culture.

The workshop foreman didn't panic about apprentices learning his techniques. The campfire musician didn't sue the next person who sang the tune. The zine maker didn't DRM the photocopier. Creation flowed because flow was the point.

AI didn't build the campfire. Fan communities have been tending it for decades. Furry artists passing around badges at 2 AM. Fanfic writers remixing each other's worlds. Modders rebuilding games from the inside out. Zinesters stapling pages in living rooms. This is the oldest creative tradition in the world, running on the oldest creative logic, and it never stopped. The market just talked loud enough to make us forget it was there.

The market is the experiment. Three centuries old, built on manufactured scarcity, designed to serve collectors and dealers and platforms. It had a good run. It made some people rich. It convinced the rest of us that art without a price tag wasn't real.

Campfire logic is the default. It was here first. It will be here after.

The tools changed. The fire didn't. Sit down. Make something. Pass it on.