

"Collective" is a term that has been bandied about a lot in art circles recently. Numerous exhibitions, international biennials, books, and articles over the past few years have focused on group work, yet the term is often haphazardly applied without sufficient attention paid to the subtleties and difficulties of working collaboratively. There are many other terms that are used by practitioners that reflect group work's complexity.

It's not surprising that group work is so poorly understood. When you're working in a group, you're working in a way the system has not defined. The modern institutional art system and marketplace have been set up to promote and sell the work of individual artists, not groups of them. Artists who work in groups, duos, couples, or other configurations, face a host of structural constraints and institutional biases. For example, most university graduate programs focus on developing the talent of individual artists instead of encouraging collaborative practice; museums are structured to market exhibitions that feature the work of a single artist and often won't pay for groups to travel, receive honoraria, or other basic amenities individual artists enjoy; curators, writers, and critics openly admit they will not talk to artist groups because it takes more time and work; magazine editors are often unwilling to run texts by multiple authors; and prestigious cultural production awards, such as The MacArthur Foundation's "genius grant," are only given to individuals. To further complicate matters, the term is often misapplied to "false collectives," or individual artists who assemble teams of artists and laborers to produce their work yet seldom give these others authorial credit, still creating their work within a strict, hierarchical structure. This lack of transparency creates a climate of false recognition and expectations—artwork that lies about its own production.

The introduction of "collectives" into the contemporary art market has simplified the complexities of this work, banished multiple and conflicting voices, and repackaged group work in a way that makes it easier to sell and promote as a fashionable trend. The term itself calls forth many associations—speaking with one voice, living together, sharing resources—that conjure utopian notions of revolutionary society. "Group art practice has a long history in most cultures," remarks artist and activist Greg Sholette. "Collectivism is something associated with the emergence of modernism and is connected to mass politics of the late-19th and early-20th centuries." Yet most groups who call themselves collectives don't live together, share an economy, or do any of the things implied by the term. There are many working collaboratively who specifically choose not to call themselves collectives. Those who work in couples, teams, groups, or collectives outside of the market do so for many reasons. Some are concerned with creating transformative experiences rather than environments for buying and selling art. Park Fiction has fought for over nine years to preserve the last open space in the St. Pauli neighborhood of Hamburg as a park designed by area residents. Some groups

hope to reach far beyond the market-based production and distribution of art in a stagnant and conservative marketplace with a pronounced lack of abusive social and economic structure. Groups like Critical Art Ensemble, exhibitions and books, challenge the corporate and governmental power structures that affect our food, bodies and lives. Because a hopelessly small number of people can make a living from participating in the commercial art market, collaborative work is about opening up possibilities and addressing destructive attitudes within the art world and the culture at large. Sometimes, working collectively is about having a good time, working on cool things, and doing something that would otherwise require only one person to accomplish.

Working collaboratively has its problems, too: inter-group squabbles and occasional struggles for power. It also doesn't guarantee that collaborative work—sometimes consensus can diminish aesthetic coherence—will be successful. Groups often go unchecked and unchallenged and sexism is often not addressed directly.

There are numerous challenges that face artists who want to participate in the art world and working in groups becomes more common, it is all the more important that practitioners take an active role in shaping their own history, producing work, making exhibitions, and gaining access to monetary support. This is a challenge in the current status-quo art world, which has constantly diminished the possibilities of the art market ends.

There are a number of things collaborative groups, in whatever form, can do to bring about change in the art world. Groups need to self-organize and create structures that celebrate independence from more traditional, market-driven models. They must hold museums, galleries, cultural centers, and other venues accountable for making the needed changes to support group work. They need to ask those who give out awards to consider groups, couples, and unions instead of only individual artists. Groups and students can advocate for collaborative curricula at art schools and universities and ask the schools to hire artists to work in groups to teach. Instead of letting uninformed writers and critics define the goals and accomplishments of group practice, groups can, and should, create their own writings both online and on paper. Perhaps most important, groups should work to build on that collaboration can happen anywhere and work to build up networks of people working in other cities and countries, thereby expanding the possibilities of the art world.

Many thanks go to Ava Bromberg, Marc Fischer, Rikke Luther, and S. Wang for their valuable criticism and input on this article.

MAKING ART IN GROUPS, COUPLES, AND OTHER CONFIGURATION

far beyond the market-based production and distribution of art, which can be a conservative marketplace with a pronounced lack of experimentation and a rigid and economic structure. Groups like Critical Art Ensemble, in their performances, challenge the corporate and governmental power structures that control art and lives. Because a hopelessly small number of artists actually make their money participating in the commercial art market, collaboration, in some forms, is about opening up possibilities and addressing destructive attitudes and behaviors within the art world and the culture at large. Sometimes, working collectively is just about sharing ideas, working on cool things, and doing something that would not be possible for one person to accomplish.

Collaboratively has its problems, too: inter-group squabbling, cliquish couplings, and internal struggles for power. It also doesn't guarantee that you will make compelling art. Sometimes consensus can diminish aesthetic coherence. Power structures within the art world go unchecked and unchallenged and sexism is often rampant unless it is dealt with and addressed directly.

There are numerous challenges that face artists who want to collaborate. As collaborative working in groups becomes more common, it is all the more important that artists take an active role in shaping their own history, producing critical dialogue, creating alternative institutions, and gaining access to monetary support. This can't be entrusted to the status-quo art world, which has constantly diminished this type of work towards

There are a number of things collaborative groups, in whatever forms they take, can do to help to change in the art world. Groups need to self-organize festivals and conferences, celebrate independence from more traditional, market-entrenched practices. They need independent museums, galleries, cultural centers, and other venues for contemporary art and to pressure museums and galleries for making the needed changes to support group work. They can put pressure on art organizations to give out awards to consider groups, couples, and untraditional configurations of artists, not just individual artists. Groups and students can agitate for more expansive curricula at schools and universities and ask the schools to hire groups and people who are not traditional to teach. Instead of letting uninformed writers and curators articulate the accomplishments of group practice, groups can, and should, self-publish their work both online and on paper. Perhaps most importantly, groups should realize that collaboration can happen anywhere and work to build autonomous networks with other groups in other cities and countries, thereby expanding their ideas exponentially.

Go to *Ava Bromberg, Marc Fischer, Rikke Luther, Gregory Sholette, and Dan ...* for their valuable criticism and input on this article.

OTHER CONFIGURATIONS

■ **BY BRETT BLOOM** ■
 ■ **PHOTOS COURTESY OF PARK FICTION** ■



Photo by Park Fiction, courtesy of Park Fiction, Berlin, Germany

INTERESTING GROUP BEHAVIOR

RELAY

Based in Europe, a database for adding information about self-organized groups.

<http://Twentiethcentury.com/uo/index.php/Relay>

COPENHAGEN FREE UNIVERSITY

An open-access website that encourages participation to build "an ongoing resource, archive, and tool of collective investigation into the issues of self-institution."

<http://www.ourorganisation.org/>

16 BEAVER GROUP

A New York-based group, their links page is astounding—tons of art groups and collaboratively run spaces. This is a really good resource and they're a good group of folks, too.

www.16beavergroup.org/links.htm

FREE COOPERATIVE STATE UNIVERSITIES

Although the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, and *Collaborative Art*, there is still *...* gleaned from *...*

<http://molodiet.com/>

AN ARCHITECTURE

Camp for Oppression: a three-day power-anarchist, arch...

<http://anarchist.com/>

rePUBLICart

A transnational project to expand the practice of art...

www.republicart.com/



Photo: a community site, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org, www.100.org

GROUP BEHAVIOR

...e for adding
...ized groups.
...uo/index.

FREE COOPERATION CONFERENCE AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BUFFALO

Although the actual conference, "Networks, Art, and Collaboration," was held in April, there is still some good information to be gleaned from this site.

<http://molodiez.org/ocs/index.php>

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...ngoing resource,
...ve investigation
...ution."

AN ARCHITEKTUR

Camp for Oppositional Architecture is a three-day pow-wow in Berlin on alternate, anarchist, architectural strategies.

<http://anarchitektur.com/>

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...ups and collab-
...is a really good
...roup of folks, too.

rePUBLICart

A transnational project developed to expand the practice of public art.

www.republicart.net/

...s.htm

BASEKAMP

Established in 1998 in Philadelphia, basekamp is a non-commercial studio and exhibition space focused on the creation, facilitation, and promotion of large-scale collaborative projects by contemporary artists.

<http://www.basekamp.com/>

NETWORK OF CASUAL ART

Chicago artist Mike Wolf's initiative, part of which is devoted to lending out AV equipment to a wide range of spaces and practitioners—a very interesting way to collaborate.

<http://www.stopgostop.com/>

FLASH MOBS

Information on the now-you-see-them-now-you-don't phantom organized assemblies.

www.flashmob.com

ROOM