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www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



Collective Form(ation)s

Nick Thurston

Last year, the young London-based urban design group Assemble won the Turner Prize. Their claim to function as a ‹studio› and for the non-art status of their work makes their new found place in art's discourses an interesting symptom of the critical gaps and lacks in the growing attention paid to art collectives. This article briefly maps out some of the key issues and missing tools that critics still need if we are to adequately understand how art collectives both re-make their own non-identity and make artworks as, in tandem, a doubled-up form of co-artworking.



Anyone who has spent time amongst some one or many of contemporary art's multiplicitous subworlds will have noticed a common trend in both art practice and discourse towards so-called ‹relational› or ‹dialogical› modes of artmaking during the last three decades. In different ways and to different extents, these modes of making art all depend on intersubjective collaboration, be that between artists and their audiences or just between artists (but never just between audiences, interestingly, because then it would not be art, right?). Collaborative practice and its criticisms have come overground and to centerground as a popular face of our current era, the extreme contemporary, by engaging with its obsessive presentism (the ‹now, now, now›), most often through large-scale but localized semi-public projects that catalyze social interactions.

Radical culture makers of all political persuasions have held the same intention at the heart of their practices for longer than historians of this fashion usually like to admit. From the near past alone one can gather a deep and broad (if not always obvious) genealogy of precedents, from Ian Wilson's discussions to Lygia Clarke's art therapy. The resounding problem with most of the ‹dialogical› projects that come under the purview of contemporary art and its criticisms is that they focus, still, on the singular artist, one who sublicenses some degree of compositional ‹freedom› to participants within the microworld of a ‹collaborative› project. Furthermore, under the name of that artist, they tend to subsume dialogues whose social import is verified by the very fact that its content is already under dispute or discussion in the non-art world – dialogues that are significant regardless of art.[1] The problem with ‹relational›, ‹dialogical› and all other such forms of collaborative projects centered around singular artists is this: they depend on unequal collaborations to function as art and so repeat with minor nuance the power structures they so often purport to counter rather than actually dispute them.

One way of resolving this problem is to internalize collaboration itself within the constitution of the artist's identity in the assembly of an artists' collective – an artificial identity that members share the right and responsibility to determine through co-artworking. Regardless of internal politics, the fundamental dissymmetry of power (of authority, of authoriality) between artist-emperor and participant-activator is negated ‹within›the collective until the collective combusts. Whether fictional or actual, an art collective is only the sum total of the work done in its name. Whereas other forms of collaboration are enterprises between two or more discrete subjects who remain individuals within the frame of their collaboration, each art collective forms a new non-identity between its participants, which stands in their stead with a conviction that edges toward legal fiction.



Lygia Clark, Estruturas vivas [Live structures], 1969.



OHO group (Andraž Šalamun), Kama Sutra, 1969.

By collapsing what ‹the artist› is and what ‹the artist› does – in the sense that an art collective constantly remakes itself through production in a more extreme way than any individual can perform their identity, no matter how fluid – art collectives inevitably remake their own identity, their form of collectivity, as an artistic act. From the Slovenian collective OHO founded in the late 1960s to the Brazilian collective Gang who were an off-shoot of the 1980s Pornism movement, each art collective always reflexively foregrounds the very idea of collectivization-in-general whilst also proposing their own specific form of collectivity. The misassumption I want to challenge is that this is all they do, or even primarily what they do. In turn, too, as well as addressing the specific critical issue of how we establish what is and is

not the artwork of an art collective, I want to flag the importance of resuscitating a broader debate about what it means to call certain practices of collective cultural production ‹art› as opposed to anything else. The answer is less clear than much recent art historical and theoretical discourse – let alone mainstream art commentary – suggest.

When the young London-based urban design collective Assemble were first shortlisted for the Turner Prize 2015 and then went on to win the award that winter two aspects of this major art-institutional nod seemed to preoccupy mainstream discussions of contemporary art, in Britain at least. Firstly, that the group made a point of constantly refusing the title ‹art› for what they do; and secondly, that they insisted on being an assembly of co-workers. Both claims stuck and were entrenched in the collective's functionalist identity as a ‹studio›, clearly pitched in the vernacular sense used by architecture and design groups to literally describe a way of producing together in a creative environment towards the development of a shared identity and brand. In various directions, debts to the impact of Theaster Gates, the growing presence of crossover design bureaus like Metahaven and a zeitgeist longing for an ‹Arte Útil› (in the general sense or the brand-name version) made the surfacing of these two aspects in mainstream conversations seem perfectly timely. What was more surprising is that they surfaced together. Putting aside the neo-productivist model of Assemble, I want to suggest that the combined power of (i) explicitly setting out to solve site-specific social problems and (ii) staking an outside-inside claim to functioning as non-artists making non-art actually established the case for Assemble as if they were symbolic of a good cause, one which both mainstream and specialist conversations could understand and get behind. I think their projects, studio model and non-art claims seem really interesting. But I do also wonder about conversations that are – or more to the point, ‹are not›– being mobilized about less worthy forms of collective practice within art's worlds. What about collective practices that set out to make art, and what about the art they make?



Turner prize 2015

Urban regenerators Assemble become first 'non-artists' to win Turner prize

Collective that uses art and design to tackle urban dereliction in Toxteth, Liverpool, becomes first non-artists to win

Mark Brown Arts correspondent

Monday 7 December 2015 21.42 GMT

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If foregrounding the specific and general questions of collectivity is inevitably one of the things that art collectives do, in a way that is necessarily different to collaborative assemblies of named individual artists with or without audience-participants, then it seems reasonable

that theorists and historians who care about issues of social form and contemporary art have focused their attention on this dynamic (the collectivity ‹expressed›) of what collectives are and do. For the sake of brevity, we can caricature three such voices that together demonstrate the overlaps and gaps in current criticism. The first two stage a key disagreement about collaborative art projects in general: Nicolas Bourriaud's oft cited survey, *Esthétique relationnelle* [*Relational Aesthetics*] (1998), unequivocally applauds the then recent turn to practices that promote the exchange of information from artist to viewer in and about broad social contexts via objects and actions that the artist cannot fully control. As the title of her book suggests, Claire Bishop's survey *Artificial Hells* (2012) critiques the spectacle of participation that participatory art proffers and the democratic ideal it presumes. At base, the two disagree about what art is and, as a consequence, what it is capable of doing or enabling. They disagree about if and how aesthetic radicality can produce political affect, a debate used by the third voice to analyze models of community proposed by art collectives: Grant Kester's two most recent books, *Conversation Pieces* (2004) but especially so *The One and the Many* (2011), as a pair consider how artists have focused on what togetherness might mean in a way that challenges our utopias of revolution and our fantasies about aesthetic autonomy or worthy productivism.

Their differences of opinion about what art is are significant and beyond the scope of this article, but those differences belie the fact that in their critical responses to art collectives all three privilege a discussion of the formal organization of the collective and their co-art-working methods over any consideration of the artworks they actually produce. This is the misleading clarity mentioned above. Whilst art collectives do re-make themselves they also make things, be it autonomous objects or props and residues and documents of non-autonomous projects. They compose their own formation (collectivities) plus forms (artworks) that can work without them. And those other forms are things that can circulate more widely, first-hand or in reproduction, than the collective itself because sustaining a compromised relationship with some one or many of art's worlds depends on them doing so, as Assemble's outside-inside status or (time and again) the history of performance art has demonstrated. Art collectives make things that can ‹work› beyond the presence of the collective (the social organization of the collective and its co-artworking methods) in that funny way that all artists must: inadequate representations in specific aesthetic forms that dismiss the artist so as to work as artworks.

As the amount of supportive and critical attention paid to art collectives grows, the question for contemporary art theory and history is to what extent the things that art collectives produce ‹as art›(their artworks) are going to be allowed to matter in critical discourse? What art collectives are and what they do can only be adequately considered in terms of the tension between how such collectives work and what they put forward as their art – we can read against any artist's intention but we would be critically irresponsible to knowingly misread it. At the moment, a lacuna is developing. The obsessive attention being paid to the collectivities that art collectives explore blurs to invisibility the relevance of the other things that they make. This is a ‹critical problem› in every sense of the phrase. Confusing or even conflating the two – the ‹is› and the ‹does›, or for that matter the ‹doing› and the ‹done› – is part of what art collectives have always aimed to do, but privileging the one over the other is precisely what collectives' artificial non-identities explicitly resist – the collectivities and the artworks are two sides of the same coin, of the collective's co-artworking.

As Kester says of dialogic art forms in general during a 2013 interview with Piotr Juskowiak and Agata Skórzynska: «I think the more pressing problem facing art critics and historians is the lack of proper research methodologies and analytic tools to simply describe what this work does.»[2] Developing those tools is the next challenge for critics who care about the specific potential of art collectives and their sub-field of practice. Only with those revisionist tools can we begin to figure out the weird pertinence of their socio-aesthetic form(ation)s ‹as art› and attend to both sides of coin.

[1] For example, the Hearing Voices movement was founded in 1987 to support groups who explore anti-medical approaches to ‹auditory hallucinations› based on listening to the voices inside one's head and refusing the stigma and assumption that such voices are necessarily a symptom of mental illness. Dora Garcia's art project, Hearing Voices Cafe (2014–), designates a temporary space where people who hear voices or are interested in the topic can gather to discuss it and share information. Setting aside questions about appropriating outsider or folk subcultures, what if people who hear voices or are interested in the topic want to gather to discuss it and share information ‹regardless of the artist›? Simply put, how can one well-meaning gesture of cultural borrowing risk colonizing the cultural commons of shared problematics?

[2] Piotr Juskowiak and Agata Skórzynska, «Interview with Grant H. Kester: On Collaborative Art Practices» (2013): http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/grant-h-kester-on-collaborative-art-practices/ [http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/grant-h-kester-on-collaborative-art-practices/] (accessed August 28, 2016).

NICK THURSTON

Nick Thurston [http://www.nickthurston.info/About]'s guest-edited issue of the Amodern [http://amodern.net/article/reading-the-illegible/] (Montreal & Thunder Bay) was published this spring; this summer a second edition of his most recent book of poetry, *Of the Subconctract [https://chbooks.com/Books/O/Of-the-Subcontract]*, was released by Coach House Books (Toronto); and later this year his edited collection of Pavel Büchler's selected writings will be published by Ridinghouse (London, due winter 2016). Current exhibitions include *Reading Matters* at Printed Matter, Inc (New York) and *Reading as Art* at Bury Museum and Sculpture Centre (UK).

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