COLLECTIVISM AFTER MODERNISM
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COLLECTIVISM AFTER MODERNISM

The Art of Social Imagination after 1945

BLAKE STIMSON & GREGORY SHOLETTE EDITORS
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This book would not have been possible without the patience and commitment of our outstanding contributors as well as the many individuals who generously provided us with illustrations. We are grateful to Rasheed Araeen, John Roberts, and Stephen Wright, who published an early version of our introduction, “Periodizing Collectivism,” in a special edition of the journal Third Text. We acknowledge the College Art Association, whose annual conference served as the starting point for this book during two sessions that we cochaired in 1998 and 2003. We wish to thank our editor, Douglas Armato of the University of Minnesota Press, for his support of this undertaking, as well as several anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on the manuscript. Finally, we thank the many artists, critics, historians, friends, and colleagues who have contributed to this volume primarily indirectly, yet importantly, by helping to lay the foundation for its conceptualization.
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The collectivization of artistic production is not new—think of the various party games and other group shenanigans of the futurists, Dadaists, and surrealists, not to mention the more earnest and properly political efforts to collectivize authorship undertaken by the productivists, muralists, and social realists—but it is a development that seemed to have no ideological afterlife in the postwar period, no ism to sustain it as a vital enterprise, no critical literature to give itself pride of place as history. While there were plenty of group exhibitions, ersatz and real professional organizations, international conferences and journals, and other developments in the 1950s and 1960s that helped to make the likes of abstract expressionism, happenings, Fluxus, pop art, minimalism, conceptual art, and others over into art-historical categories, none of these brought the question of collective voice to the fore in the same way, none saw collectivization itself as a vital and primary artistic solution, none sought first and foremost to generate a voice that declared its group affiliation, its collectivization, as the measure of its autonomy.

Individual self-understanding was indeed downplayed as it had been before the war, it might be objected, and this was the basis of this later period’s legitimate claim to be “neo-avant-garde.” But it was different: now the nexus of artistic activity was projected outward and away from the core of the old Romantic expressive subject toward the material infrastructure of art-making—to the paint and canvas and drips and splatters, for example, or to the street or landscape, or to the gallery, the contract, and the advertisement—and not outward toward questions of social organization and collective identification. Put schematically, we might say that modernist art after the war no longer found the solution to its founding solipsism problem in collectivism but instead in a brute form of materialism: “this is not really a
picture (much less an icon or shared ideal),” it convinced itself, “it is just paint on canvas, or stuff from the street, or arbitrary social conventions, and if you see in it anything more you are missing the point.” Looked at in retrospect such a turn of hand is not surprising, really: the old modernist collectivism was indissolubly linked with a bigger ism, a bigger ideal that had failed—communism—and it had little choice but to distance itself. This does not mean that modernist collectivism did not persist, of course, even without the old backing from Moscow and the like, nor does it mean there were not other, New Left, forms of political vitality that had their impact on the self-conception of art. It is only this: collectivism had to redefine its meaning and purpose with respect to the past: it had no choice but to hedge. This volume studies that struggle with redefinition with all the attendant complications of carrying over into a new period—“after modernism,” as we are calling it—as baggage from the past.

Our interest in this topic does not come from nowhere, of course. Indeed, we are at a particularly fortuitous juncture now to take up such a study: collectivism, it would seem, has recently been reborn once again, and often with little or none of the leftovers from its own rich past. One of us has already spoken to this new wave of collectivism in a spleenish letter to the industry’s leading trade magazine, Artforum, which we reprint here in full.

To the editor:

For those who crave cultural distraction without the heavy intellectual price tag now comes a pack of new and inscrutable art collectives offering colorful, guilt-free fun. Forcefield, Derraindrop, Paper Rad, Gelatin, The Royal Art Lodge, HobbyPopMuseum, their names flicker impishly across the otherwise dull screen of the contemporary art world invoking not so much the plastic arts as the loopy cheer of techno music and its nostalgia for a make-believe 1960s epitomized by LSD, free love and day-glo—instead of civil rights, feminism and SDS. Yes, artists’ groups are hot. Or so chime the harbingers of art world value production as its symbol-producing machinery gears up to meet what is still a speculative demand. As Alison M Gingeras tells us in the March edition of Artforum this new collectivity is not at all solemn. It is “insouciant.” It eschews the “sociopolitical agenda associated with collective art making” and reflects “a juvenile disregard for historical veracity.” And all that is fine because its indifference “mirrors the times.”

What times I ask?

The United States has tossed international law to the four winds and invaded another nation using the most transparent of pretexts, global capitalism has penetrated every corner of life including art, education, and leisure time, and meanwhile the art world carries on, business as usual. Those times? Or the bad new days as Bertolt Brecht remarked?

One thing Gingeras does get straight however is that radical politics were very much a central concern for the collectives I knew and worked with in the 1980s and 1990s including Political Art Documentation and Distribution (PAD/D), Group Material, Carnival Knowledge, and REPOhistory as well as those that came before and after including Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC), Art Workers Coalition (AWC), Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), Paper Tiger in the 1970s and early 1980s, more recently Dyke
Action Machine, Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, RTMark, The Yes Men, Sub Rosa, Critical Art Ensemble, Yomango, Whisper Media and Temporary Services to mention but a smattering of the many self-organized artists organizations that have emerged over the past thirty years. And if group anonymity permitted these varied art collectives to boldly challenge the status quo it is likely that it also provides a mask for the anti-social cynicism of the new and the few who “stake their identity on a certain strategic frivolity.”

So why this sudden rush to revamp the political rebelliousness of group artistic practice? To re-package it as “tribal,” “exuberant,” “insouciant”? Because when compared to almost every previous collective and many new ones, the recent crop of gallery sponsored art groupettes is unmistakably a product of enterprise culture. As put forward by historian Chin-tao Wu enterprise culture is the near total privatization of everything up to and including that which once stood outside or against the reach of capitalism including avant-garde and radical art. If communal activity, collaboration, egalitarian cooperation run
directly opposite individuated forms of individualistic greed, enterprise culture will not aim to overtly repress this tendency, but instead seek a way of branding and packaging contradiction in order to sell it back to us. No surprise then that this new collectivity is organized around fashion with its members sharing “nothing more than vacant facial expressions and good taste in casual clothes.” Thus these groovy new art groups not only appear freshly minted but thanks to an endemic historical amnesia on the part of curators, art historians, art administrators, critics and sadly even artists they actually appear, choke, radical, well at least from within the circumscribed horizon of contemporary art.

My advice? Perhaps it is time to engage in a bit of reverse engineering. I mean if the prestige and financial power of the art world can be mobilized to authenticate one rather anemic form of collective practice, then why not use that breach to leverage other, more challenging and socially progressive collaborative forms as well? Why stop at the museum either? What about work places, schools, public spaces, even the military? The challenge therefore is to concoct a counter-vaccine or Trojan Virus that renders administrated culture defenseless before a self-replicating, radically democratic and participatory creativity but one that is every bit as playful and nimble in its own passionate way as so-called insouciant collectivity. Any takers?

Indeed, this volume might well be understood to position itself at a crossroads. “Collectivism after modernism,” thus, is understood as a pivot or turning point to several possible outcomes. Put simply, modernist collectivism stopped making sense after the war and is only now coming back into view but often as a half-materialized specter in denial of its own past. This larger historical question is the main concern in the introduction that follows. Each of the contributors to this volume addresses the specifics—the successes and setbacks and complications—of artists and others as they grappled with the opportunities and burdens of their past. In so doing they inevitably reach beyond the conceptual frame—“collectivism after modernism”—that was used to bring them together in the first place. The aim of this volume is not to force fit the manifold rich and generative details of history to the easier comprehension given by its broad outline or vice versa. Instead our aim is to put the two into dialogue as checks and balances, forest and trees, for historical understanding. What follows is a brief sketch of those specifics.

Jelena Stojanović opens our study with her survey of four highly influential European collectives—CoBrA IAE, Internationale Lettriste, Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste, and the Situationist International—positioning them squarely within the era of the cold war and the cultural politics that era gave rise to. She points out that the internationaleries uniquely recognized the ideological pitfalls of a postwar modernism, which was effectively reduced to an apolitical functionalism, in the cold-war era. The internationaleries countered with what she calls a grotesque performance of those very ideals transforming such ironic play into tactics for intervening into everyday life. Reiko Tomii examines collectivism in
postwar Japan, pointing out that artists reacted with sarcasm to the “ingrained collectivism in Japanese society as a whole,” connecting this performative collectivism to the accelerating dematerialization of the art object on the one hand and to concerns about national identity on the other. Chris Gilbert’s chapter focuses on Art & Language and the way that group attempted to resist and repurpose the functionalism of postwar culture, institutionalizing themselves in an attempt to dictate the terms of their own sociality.

Jesse Drew’s study of Paper Tiger Television looks at the role anticolonialist guerrilla movements played, in combination with new, portable video technology, in compelling the formation of media-based collectives in the 1980s, while Rachel Weiss explores the successive series of collectives that responded to changing political, economic, and artistic circumstances in socialist Cuba. Meanwhile, Rubén Gallo notes that, because mural production in Mexico was a state-sanctioned form of collective art, interest in collectivism among younger artists did not manifest itself until the early 1970s, when a wave of independent collectives emerged that reflected the antiestablishment, cultural politics of the New Left. Alan W. Moore’s chapter on activist-oriented collectives in New York City indicates that the art world has frequently overlapped with a countercultural world of squats, happenings, and raves as well as community-based art forms and activism yet seldom acknowledging this significant yet hidden connection.

Okwui Enwezor describes the way the Congolese collective Le Groupe Amos is made up of writers, intellectuals, activists, and artists who use public interventions to directly confront the material and educational needs of specific communities in Africa, and the penultimate chapter by Irina Aristarkhova focuses on the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia (CSM), whose work opposing the Russian military has transformed aspects of collective, political activism in that nation. Brian Holmes concludes the historical study by taking up the emergence of tactical media in the late 1990s by a new generation of collectives, including Gran Fury, the Guerrilla Girls, Ne Pas Plier, and later RTMark and The Yes Men, which points to the possibility of a generalized do-it-yourself creativity of collective networks and carnivalesque street celebrations that blur the lines between artists, service and information workers, activists, and people in developing countries in a struggle against the interests of transnational corporations and regulatory entities such as the World Trade Organization and the World Economic Forum.

As with any survey there are numerous omissions, and ours is no exception. As an act of general contrition we ask advanced forgiveness from those, both living and dead, collective or not, who have been omitted or who have been represented in less detail than we would have liked. We also
admit a desire to see all of these lesser-studied histories, as well as the topic of collectivism itself, better reflected in the curriculum of contemporary art history, media, cultural, and visual studies and done so with the complexity that the subject clearly deserves. It is our unabashed hope that this volume will help open the door to the study of collectivism, not as a means of “normalizing” it or representing it as one more genus of artistic practice, but to theorize it as a form of production and intervention that raises fundamental questions about the nature of creative labor and how history is recorded and transmitted, for whom, and to what ends.
There is a specter haunting capitalism’s globalization, the specter of a new collectivism. We experience this specter daily now in two complementary forms, each with less or more force than the other depending on where we are in the world. Both of these forms have deep roots and complex genealogical structures and each returns to us now mostly as a ghost but as a ghost with a hardened, cutting edge running the length of its misshapen and ethereal outline, a ghost whose concrete effects and ungraspable vitality seem evermore to determine our present. This edge is fully within the crisis and the dream that is late capitalism, and for better or worse, it offers the only prospect for moving on. If the conditions prove right, the work of artists among others just might venture from its hiding place in this specter’s ghostly vapor, find its once-heralded but now long-lost position at the cutting edge, and bring new definition to a rapidly changing world.

The first of these new, airy forms of collectivism, the one in the headlines as we write, is the collectivism of public opinion rising and falling on the Arab street or ricocheting across Al Jazeera’s or Al Qaida’s networks or whispering in this or that secret, self-isolated cell gathered together in a cave in the Pakistani countryside, or in an apartment in metro Toronto.¹ In this form collectivism imagines itself and conducts itself as a full-blown anti-imperialist force, as an organic community loosely but dynamically organized around beliefs and resentments, around faith and ideology and strategy, around a sense of belonging that realizes itself in the name of an ideal and against, with vitriol and spleen, the anti-idealism and immorality of the

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1. Karl Marx