

Introducing Insouciant Art Collectives, the Latest Product of Enterprise Culture

Gregory Sholette

Over the years, the rebel has naturally become the central image of this culture of consumption, symbolizing endless, directionless change, an eternal restlessness with "the establishment" -- or, more correctly, with the stuff "the establishment" convinced him to buy last year.

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 with its nostalgia for a make-believe 1960s epitomized by psychedelia, 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. One commentator describes the tenor of this new wave of group art making as "fast, cheap, and exuberant." Another uses the term "insouciant," to underscore their untroubled and ultimately apolitical disposition. Indeed, the members of Derraindrop must have been feeling pretty insouciant when in an interview they joked about a plan to "... kill Paul McCartney as a publicity stunt last year, we were going to wear like one of our shirts and just totally like fucking blow his head off and get our picture taken in every newspaper in the world." Ah, the proverbial archetype of artist as sociopath, only amplified in this case by a communal spirit resembling the Manson Cult more than the Zapatistas and substituting an aged rock idol for the role of Sharon Tate.

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But can we really blame these kids? With zero knowledge about the rich history of collective art practice, they naively reinvent it as if it were another art style or a fraternity for cultural delinquents. Certainly there exists a long legacy of raging against the anesthetized routines of modern life. And it is peppered with plenty of neurotic role models from Alfred Jarri to Johnny Rotten. Except when the Sex Pistols wailed "God Save the Queen," it was anything but an invitation to a schmooze fest with the establishment. Likewise, when the Japanese art collective known simply as "I" filled a gallery with tons of gravel and invoked the name Jarri in the mid-60s, it was an intentional act of under-

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mining both institutional space and artistic identity. Just as the descent into primitive eroto-cannibalistic behavior in Jean Luc Godard's apocalyptic film *Weekend* signals the end of the line for bourgeois radicalism, so too do our fledgling "fast, cheap and exuberant" art collectives blissfully embrace the entrepreneurial values of the contemporary art world including self-satisfied commercialism, fashionable narcissism, and the rejection of art as a vehicle for social change. (Cut to kid pounding bright red trap set in the middle of the woods as pseudo guerrilla cell prepares kidnapped bourgeois family for supper.)

I can assure you that radical politics were

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very much a 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 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 artist organizations that have emerged over the past thirty years. And if it is group anonymity itself that permitted so many art collectives to boldly challenge the status quo, then perhaps it also provides a mask for the anti-social cynicism of the new and the few?

So why this sudden need to revamp the political rebelliousness of group artistic practice, to re-package it as something "tribal," "exuberant," "insouciant"? 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 opposite the reach of capitalism including avant-garde and radical art. At the same time, it provides the ground for sensation-seeking artist entrepreneurs such as Damian Hirst and the Chapman Brothers. Shock is simply another medium for career advancement. And if communal activity, collaboration, egalitarian cooperation run directly opposite to individuated forms of capitalist greed, well then enterprise culture does not seek to overtly repress these collaborative endeavors; instead, it devises ways of branding and package contradiction in order to sell it right back to us. But wait. Can capital really appropriate its own antithesis? No, of course it can't. But it is able to utilize a range of sophisticated, representational and code-
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copying technologies much in the way vaccines are formulated to arouse an immune system response. Vaccines are devised by stripping the protein shell of a virus from its resourceful DNA. The contemporary art industry has found a way of separating the image of collectivist art from its incontestable history of overt, political radicalism. Only after this de-politicized scrubbing process can new group formations be rendered appropriate for the institutional art world. The resulting vacuity leaves them fully re-loadable and ready for an astonishing infusion of jargonistic hyperbole. (And this rhetoric always revolves almost entirely around tropes of primitivism and naiveté as illustrated above.)

De-contamination of collective politics permits the individualistically centered art world to "bond" with its antithesis safely and without any serious disruption of its market for discretely authorized products. Therefore these groovy new art groups do not only appear freshly minted but -- thanks to an endemic historical amnesia on the part of curators, art historians, administrators, critics and sadly even artists -- entities such as Forcefield et al. actually appear (choke) radical, at least from within the circumscribed horizon of contemporary art. But rather than giving this ground up completely, can we 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? Why stop at the museum either? What about work places, schools, public spaces, even the military? The challenge now is to concoct a counter-vaccine that will render administrated culture helpless before the spread of a radically democratic, participatory collectivism. But just one last wish; could this Trojan Virus be just as fun and nimble in its own, politically serious way, as the new insouciant collectivity?

mailto: gsholette@artic.edu