

# Our Cause, Our Art

EDA CUFER ON COLLECTIVISM AFTER MODERNISM

COLLECTIVISM AFTER  
MODERNISM: THE ART OF  
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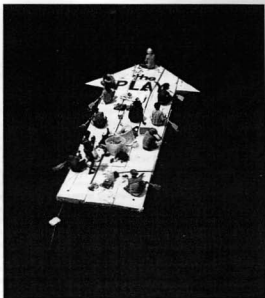
TO SOME, THE NOTION of collectivism lies at the heart of twentieth-century utopian visions, evoking the image of selfless communities defined by what they share (labor, space, property, belief systems). In contrast to individualism, collectivism connotes the ideals of community, solidarity, proximity, and trust. To others—whose formation in the art and political world was shaped by collective experience under totalitarianism—collectivism resonates in disturbing ways, conjuring the underside of those ideals: submission to authority, censorship, and surveillance. Despite the recent popularity of collaborative and collective art practices, collectivism is not itself a value. In communitarian societies, as in art communities, the value of collectivism is determined by the quality of relations among those who maintain it.

In their introduction to *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, editors Blake Stimson and Gregory Shollette skillfully utilize collectivism's inherent ambiguities and contradictions to open a book that examines collectively produced art across many cultural divides and political contexts. Tracing the function of collectivist art as an analytical and critical agency within a larger frame of historical and political developments originating in modernity, Stimson (a professor of art history) and Shollette (an artist and cofounder of two collectives, Political Art Documentation/Distribution and REPHistory) argue that art collectives give focus to the social and economic conditions under which culture is produced. This focus is particularly urgent at the present moment, they write, as we face "the specter of a new collectivism" and the breach between its two complementary, contemporary forms—the absolutists and zealots of warring fundamentalist groups led by holy warriors, and the adherents of a new e-collectivism whose faith in eBay and other online parishes depends on the price being right or the information downloadable.

The ten essays commissioned for this book introduce the reader to dozens of art collectives operating in Cuba, Europe, Japan, the United States, Mexico, Russia, and Africa between 1945 and the present. Together, they provide a rich cross-reading of the politics and practices

of contemporary collaborative creativity and begin to write the largely unwritten and unreflected history of collective art in the second half of the twentieth century. Although the book is missing examples from South America, Eastern Europe, China, and India (among other places), its value does not come from offering these case studies as national files, but rather from allowing us to see them mixed together on one table, under the undifferentiating flatness of contemporary light. It is not when the differences are noted, but when they are let go of, that the most surprising revelations occur. That is when we begin to realize that the accents and idioms of local stories are moved by causes and imbued with visions that transcend the particularities of time and place. Reading these case studies enables us to trace certain geopolitical cultural processes in our own time back to the dreams and dramas of a previous century. The currently debated idea of a global public sphere, for example, recalls the early twentieth-century avant-garde's quest for cultural internationalism and world citizenship.

The historical avant-garde had to be adaptive in order to survive. One of the strategies it developed to confront unstable social and political conditions was to organize in groups in order to defend the creativity of individual relations within depersonalized, homogenized, and bureaucratized social structures. Another was to make aesthetics out of contradictions; and beyond that, to generate autonomous zones, displacements, and semiotic shocks to disturb authoritarian cultures. These tactics were adopted by subsequent art movements and art collectives. Standing firmly in this legacy were four European collectives that rose to prominence in the 1950s: CoBrA, Lettrist International, International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and the Situationist International. These groups are the focus of the book's first essay, "Internationalities: Collectivism, the Grotesque, and



The Play, Current of Contemporary Art, 1969, Styrofoam. Performance view, river between Fyoto and Osaka, Japan, 1969. Photo: Higuchi Shigeru. © Iseizumi Keichi.

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Cold War Functionalism." Here, Jelena Stojanović eloquently describes the fracture, precipitated by the cold war, of the modernist dreamworld of internationalism. As large parts of the world were cut off from international links and exchanges, internationalism became, in fact, Western. Stojanović exposes a dramatic shift in the deployment of avant-garde strategies: from the utopian-aesthetic projections of the early groups, toward a severe critique of surrounding hegemonic systems on the part of later ones. In their critique of society, these cold war collectives challenged capitalism as well as official Marxist doctrine and institutionalized avant-gardism. In doing so, they invented a new mode of encrypted artistic expression; a performative-rhetorical tactic that Stojanović characterizes as "grotesque," or "carnavalesque" (after Mikhail Bakhtin). Indeed, the term internationalities (coined by CoBrA member Christian Dotremont to mock and mongrelize the modernist pedigree of international



From top: Proceso Pentágono, *El secuestro* (Kidnapping), 1973, action, street near Bellas Artes, Mexico City; © Victor Muñoz; Demonstration organized by Residents the Streets, Liverpool Street Station, London, 1999. Photo: © Andrew Ward/rephotophotos.com.

avant-gardism) is an example of precisely such *carri-volesquerie*. This new artistic rhetoric recurs in various manifestations (the "Trojan horse," "overidentification," "institutional critique," etc.) in a number of texts, and is one of the fortuitous, unifying motifs of the volume. Whether in hyperindustrialized Japan, Communist Cuba, PRI's Mexico, capitalist Western Europe, or corporate America, the structural similarities of these collectives are to a large extent the result of their adoption of similar techniques. Placing under scrutiny such diverse institutions and systems as capitalism, communism, the state, the military, and museums, these collectives tend, regardless of national origin, to expose the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of administrative structures by critiquing them, rather than by building alternative models.

For example, in a chapter titled "The Mexican Pentagon," Rubén Gallo analyzes the cultural sabotage techniques used by Mexican art collectives in the 1970s. He focuses on Proceso Pentágono, one of whose projects can be seen as an early example of proto-

institutional critique and a prevision of the cultural complexities that have come to define twenty-first-century global biennial culture. After the group was invited to participate in the 1977 Paris Biennale, they became curious about the event's curatorial administration, in particular the political leanings of Ángel Kalenberg, the Uruguayan museum director chosen to head the Latin American section. Although their demand that the curator be replaced was rejected, Proceso Pentágono still took part in the biennial, exhibiting a re-creation of a Mexican police torture chamber and producing their own catalogue. Three years after the event, they published *Expediente Bienal X*, a book that contained copies of letters Proceso Pentágono exchanged with biennial organizers, including the group's inquiry into Kalenberg's possible ties to Uruguay's military dictatorship and the cold bureaucratic responses of the Paris Biennale organizers who denied the relevance of politics to art. Proceso Pentágono used the platform of participation to expose their political concerns artistically rather than through the more obvious responses of protest or withdrawal. As Gallo points out, "*Expediente* reveals the process through which art institutions like the Biennale can neutralize the political value of works of art."

During the cold war, no efficient institutional links existed to foster the development of international, culturally democratic discourse or to bridge the gaps created by politics. The existence of cold war art collectives generally remained enclosed within the borders of their immediate social realities. And yet, as we observe the separate lives of these collectives, the Western and non-Western experiences somehow overlap and coexist. Lonely, isolated, and distinct as these stories are individually, the disconnected narratives can also be perceived as intersecting rays within a global matrix. Utilizing locally found physical resources and social materials, each group produces artworks that speak beyond provincial frontiers. There may be galaxies of difference between the UK art collective Art & Language discussed by Chris Gilbert; the US-based video collective Paper Tiger Television analyzed by Jesse Drew; the hyperurban alternative culture collectives of New

York considered by Alan W. Moore; the tactical media and antiglobalist groups discussed by Brian Holmes; the collective art practices situated in Communist Cuba reviewed by Rachel Weiss; the postcolonial African examples surveyed by Okwui Enwezor; the performance-based Japanese groups Hi Red Center, Zero Dimension, and The Play plotted by Reiko Tomii; and the post-Soviet activist groups championed by Irina Aristarkhova. But what binds all these groups together, more than the mere fact of collectivism, is the "social imagination" they bring to their projects, signaling a set of practices that represent a shift away, to quote the editors, "from a focus on art as a given institutional and linguistic structure to an active intervention in the world of mass culture."

The fall of the Berlin Wall not only symbolized the end of the lonely *danse macabre* between artists and totalitarian, nationalist, or dictatorial states; it also symbolized the end of the standoff between two radically different hegemonic discursive regimes. With the stark opposition between capitalism and communism over, it becomes necessary to map a new discursive territory and to redefine what "our cause" might mean in the twenty-first century. The expanded opportunities created by globalization are not subject to cold war border controls, but they come with new constraints: specifically, those of a neoliberal art system with a giant thirst for politically engaged, globally flavored art. As a result, the social and political causes of contemporary collective art practices often become commodified and depoliticized before they have managed to mark their own autonomous zones or accomplish much on their own. But those who leave the corrupted field of art in order to engage the ideals of pure social or political activism can quickly become disenchanted by the political and business agendas of NGOs and other so-called humanitarian agencies. Enwezor alludes to the ambiguous function of those agencies in Africa. Two of this valuable book's most compelling essays—"The Production of Social Space as Artwork" by Enwezor, and "Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics" by Holmes—show how avant-garde and neo-avant-garde discourses can be efficiently used to navigate the new global art market conditions and power formations; a clear demonstration of how creative rethinking of the past can inform critical prethinking of the future. □

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