



Zapatista guerillas meeting in Chiapas
Mexico mid 1900s

COUNTING ON YOUR COLLECTIVE SILENCE

Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice


GREGORY G. SHOLETTE

Hi Greg,

As I'm thinking about your questions on collective practice, I'm disturbed but not surprised to sense that it would be far easier for me to speak about the difficulties of collaborative work than to outline the things which draw me to it. Here are a few of the positive aspects ...that are important to me: Working as a collective or collaborative means that we can do projects on a scale that one person could only do with great difficulty. Resources, skills, interests, knowledge and ideas are pooled. This contributes to the overall political and aesthetic complexity, diversity and effectiveness of the projects. Working on these projects involves developing collaborative practices which, however problematic, visibly reject a culture of hyper-individualism in favor of other models of "work" and of social (and even personal) responsibility.

David Thorne,

Resistant Strains art collective, NYC, 1999

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From the swipe of a plastic debit card at the grocery store to the surveillance of so-called public spaces to the labels in your undergarments, an administered collectivity hides everywhere in plain sight. Every ‘I’ conceals an involuntary “belongingness,” every gesture a statistic about purchasing power, education and the market potential of your desire. A new IBM computer program named “Clever” even detects what its designers call “communities in their nascent

stages.” Clever locates these web-based fraternities “even before members are aware of their community’s existence” by tracing the electronic links “spontaneously” generated between users. 1. Therefore if collective incorporation is so unrelenting that it can be revealed by a machine, one might question why non-individual cultural activity is treated as the exception? Conversely, how can the artist be defined as an autonomous producer detached from politics, history, and the market?



Wochenklausur community inter-
vention Austria

While postmodernism may have deflated the status of the auteur, the art industry and its discourse nevertheless remain dependent on a litany of individual name-brand producers that circulates like global aesthetic currency. As the collective Critical Art Ensemble succinctly put it:

“The individual’s signature is still the prime collectible, and access to the body associated with the signature is a commodity that is desired more than ever--so much so, that the obsession with the artist’s body has made its way into “progressive” and alternative art networks. Even community art has its stars, its signatures, and its bodies.” 2.

By contrast, when a group of artists “self-institutionalize” themselves to produce collaborative or collective work, the critical response if any, falls into consideration of only a few distinct categories: 1. Art world duos like Gilbert and George, Komar and Melamid or Sophie and Hans Arp, in which a methodology grounded on individual art practice is indiscriminately applied to two; 2. Collective authorship as a backdrop for discussing the evolution of an individual’s career: e.g., Kiki Smith as former member of Collaborative Projects or Joseph Kosuth as co-founder of Art & Language; 3. The art collective as representative of an entire historical *mis en scene*, as when the 1980s became the decade of the activist art group.

In her essay “Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism,” critic Suzi Gablik argued for a new kind of artist who understands that “the boundary between self and Other is fluid rather than fixed: the Other is included within the boundary of selfhood.” (Gablik 84) However,

boundaries both real and imaginary are historically determined and often harshly material. By contrast I understand conflict and difference, rather than “merging,” to be necessary for the formation of the collective. Furthermore such incipient abrasiveness must carry over to the routine functioning of the group possibly sparking, violent repercussions both inside the collective and between the collective and existing institutional forms. As anyone who has worked in this way will attest, the effort required to sustain collective work rises in direct proportion to the professional and emotional toll extracted on constituency. Yet it is exactly this state of over-determination --the heterogeneity of membership, the meetings where too much is attempted or rejected, too much brought to the table and left off the table, the fleeting ecstasy of collaborative expenditure and a space suddenly opened to the unpredictable effects of class, race, gender, sexual preference, age, divergences in ability, knowledge and career status --all of this can never be encompassed within the group identity per se; yet this excess is what makes the collective viable.



YOMANGO performance with stolen Champaign in Barcelona bank, 2002

Perhaps the central concern of this text is to rethink the way collective practice is apprehended. Instead of the individual opposed to the collective or the artist deciding to work with the “community,” my contention is that “collectivity” in one form or another is virtually an ontological condition of modern life. This supposition guarantees that there is no location out of which an individual, an artist for example, can operate alone in opposition to society. While this does not invalidate the irrepressible desire to escape or radically re-write what Thomas Hobbes called the social contract, it does allow us to re-configure the often stated opposition between collective and individual as that of a displacement between two kinds of collectives: one passive and reflexive, the other active and self-valorizing. In his text “Postscript on the Societies of Control” Gilles Deleuze outlined this new world order insisting, “We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become ‘dividuals,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.”...Man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt.” (Deleuze 5) Furthermore, the narrative of a recent science fiction film, *The Matrix* (1999 by Larry and Andy Wachowsky) serves an example of how this condition of collective indenture is already figured within mass culture. At the same time it offers insight into why some artists choose to work collectively and others do not. 3.

“The collective nature of the work can be both exhilarating and exhausting. Working with different peoples strengths; balancing individual needs and interests with collective desires and demands... Problems in maintaining public

profile as a collective: making sure the same individuals don't get highlighted again and again in media coverage, allowing different people to speak for the group while maintaining continuity. There is still the cult of the individual auteur and we as a collective sometimes become kind of invisible. —Lisa Maya Knauer, discussing REPOhistory at the 10 year mark, NYC, 1999

What I recall most happily are particular periods of working, entering a sort of “flow” state in current jargon together with others, all of us working towards a common goal. This would have to be the “painting parties” held [at ABC No Rio] for various purposes, mostly for Potato Wolf cable TV productions... I felt like my ideas were being hyped up and enhanced by others in the group. —Alan Moore, Co-founder ABC No Rio, NYC

In his important re-working of the classical Marxist concept of ideology, Fredric Jameson maintained that “the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are “managed” and defused, rechanneled and offered spurious objects...such incentives, as well as the impulses to be managed by the mass cultural text, are necessarily Utopian in nature.” (Jameson 287) Instead of simply masking the true relations of power as argued by many theorists of ideology these “spurious objects” satiate a concrete need that, referencing Walter Benjamin’s famed Thesis on the Philosophy of History, Jameson has termed the “Political Unconscious.” If Benjamin insisted that the radical historian must “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”(Benjamin 255) Jameson’s elaboration requires that we recognize “...figures [representations] for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society” (Ibid 291) even in the “...most degraded of all mass cultural texts, advertising slogans--visions of external life, of the transfigured body, of preternatural sexual gratification--[these] may serve as the model of manipulation on the oldest Utopian longings of humankind.” (Ibid 287)

Public parade-performance by REPOhistory 1992, NYC



If utopian desire forms a residual political unconscious or figurative narration within mass culture then collectivity must be present as well. Perhaps the most transparent figure of collective practice is that found in certain science fiction narratives that depict a fantasy of organized resistance to collective occupation by hostile “others”: aliens, vampires, mutant humans, and even computers. It is a narrative that appears in films such as “They

Live” by John Carpenter or George Romero’s “Dawn of the Dead” and in television series like “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” and “V,” a 1980s made-for-television mini-series in which human resistance fighters sabotage predacious aliens disguised as benevolent visitors. Reportedly “V” even inspired an anti-Apartheid graffiti campaign when broadcast in South Africa. “The Matrix” however is most explicit in the way it narrates desires and anxieties about collectivization and resistance. The film takes place in an apocalyptic near future that looks very much like the present. As the plot unfolds we discover that “The Matrix” is the name for a virtual-reality simulation program replicating the real world that is simultaneously fed into the cerebellum of the unknowing human population by an artificial intelligence. The real world is in fact an enormous “farm” in which humans are grown in liquid-filled vats stacked a mile high. However a small number of humans have managed to “unplug” themselves from the electronic hegemony of “The Matrix” and joined forces to free mankind from its hidden bondage. What is revealing about this story is the way it represents two versions of human collectivization. One is involuntary, consisting of massified bodies digitally dreaming in a cavernous computerized nursery. Opposed to this reflexive collectivity is the militarized multi-ethnic cell made up of both men and women.

“The Matrix,” like “V” and other examples of this science fiction subgenre, represents organized resistance to mass control as heterogeneous, self-sufficient and culturally diverse. At times the violence of the enemy holding these micro-collectives together barely outweighs the collective’s internal antagonisms, as when the Judas-like character in “The Matrix” betrays the group in exchange for returning to the comfort of virtual simulation. The most important moment for the occupation fantasy narrative is the de-concealment. The protagonist of “The Matrix” is offered two “virtual” pills --one blue, one red. By choosing the blue pill he will remain anesthetized within The Matrix. Ingesting the red pill however reveals what lies behind its screen except that he can never turn back to the recompense of the simulated world.

For artists who choose collective action (the red pill), an implicit collective state that provides them with an illusion of individuality is displaced by a collectivity made up of partial meanings and irregular shards of history. Taking the red pill also means that the chimera of individual practice will never return at least with its original luster intact. At some level most artists understand this choice.

The issue of rupture within community based artistic collaborations is an important topic because rupture is an inherent part of the process of working with the community... Communities are not made up of people who are all the



Resistance fighters dance literally underground in Zion from the Matrix Reloaded 2003

same, even if they are the same race. Communities imply a very loose connection of people where cultural, racial and class issues are never a homogeneous mix, and where questions of difference always surface. —From “Some notes on rupture” unpublished text by Tomie Arai, Artist and member of Godzilla, NYC: 1995.

The founding or “minting” of any group identity, either corporate or cultural, is always dependent on the material that exceeds the group signature. But while the capitalist, corporate identity aims at purification -- a precise profile indefinitely replicated to enhance consumption-- the political and cultural collective identity signifies something else: a recognition of the inherently collective texture of the political and cultural that surrounds as well as intersects the group identity at all times. This overdetermination even affects the day-to-day working procedure of the non-hierarchical collective where sudden accelerations of enthusiasm are followed by equally unexpected plunges in spirit. The Marxist theoretician Antonio Negri describes such radical, concentrated excess as a “destructuration,” by which I take him to mean both a demolition of capitalist totality and a recognition of the discontinuous nature of the working class (applied here to the cultural collective.) (Negri 63) Negri’s formulation also implies that such arrangements are always inherently at risk of destabilization.

Marx understood the complexity of representing new forms of political organizing. Writing about the 1871 Paris Commune he emphasized the way this historic insurrection was less a total break with history and more of an active re-absorption by the masses of their own alienated powers previously turned against them in the form of the state. Although the Commune lasted only three months, Parisians still managed during this time to declare universal suffrage, to install a communal government and to decree that all governmental officials be paid only workmen’s wages. It is worth contrasting Marx’s re-appropriation of state control with the “Society of Control” described by Gilles Deleuze which lacks any single instrument of oppression; not the state, the factory, or the prison. He argues that Today a diffused “universal modulation” forces the individual into a perpetual state of mutation as continuously shifting systems of surveillance, education, and work replace any fixed locus of power. Without collapsing these different conceptions of the social body-- one analogical the other digital-- it is possible to see that each presents us with an economy of forces in which acts of displacement alternate with routines of administration. In both cases resistance depends upon recognizing its very possibility within the familiar. Marx describes the predicament this way:

It is generally the fate of completely new historical creations to be mistaken for the counterpart of older and even defunct forms of social life, to which they may bear a certain

likeness. Thus the new Commune, which breaks the modern State power, has been mistaken for a reproduction of the mediaeval Communes, which first preceded, and afterwards became the substratum of, that very State power.

—Karl Marx, *Civil War in France*)

For Marx the Paris Commune was a displacement in which a unique historical event outwardly replicates an archaic but well-known form: in this case the medieval commune (recall the deceptive role simulation of the familiar plays in the pop-culture example of *The Matrix*). Deleuze also understands the challenge of recognizing resistance from within the “society of control” when he rhetorically muses “can we already grasp the rough outlines of these coming forms, capable of threatening the joys of marketing?” (Deleuze 7) His question, which explicitly adds the problem of pleasure to the one of recognition that Marx raises, might be provisionally answered with the politically engaged artists collective if this is understood, as proposed here, not as a unity of differences but as the overdetermined arrangement akin to what Negri describes as the “radical, irreducible differentness of the revolutionary movement.”

Above all else the activist art collective is a de facto critique of the bourgeois public sphere. Not only does the heterogeneous nature of such groups question the apparent separation of public and private space, but also the process of self-institutionalization itself inevitably assimilates political functions normally allocated to the bourgeois public sphere. Sometimes the act of governing is consciously invoked, at other times simply manifest, but eventually the politics of the collective are thrust into view. For the members of the collective this means deciding amongst themselves what kind of decision-making process they will operate under including what the rules will be regarding membership (should it be open to all who attend meetings, or just active participants?) and voting (do motions pass using a simple majority or through consensus by every member?). Ironically it is often the process of internal politicization that reveals the lack of historical memory among such groups. Consider the following texts excerpted from the minutes of three politically-engaged artists collectives in New York City: AMCC (Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, 1975 to 1977), PAD/D (Political Art Documentation and Distribution, 1980-1986, actively), and REPOhistory (1989-present):

Our most urgent task right now is to find a more representative method of arriving at true agreement within the group. Not to do this is to doom us to continual tactical maneuvering using these rules--tactics that , as was amply demonstrated last week, lead to destructive polarization and quite palpable disunity...In this group we are not looking

Second issue of Red-Herring 1978



for “victory” of one strand of opinion over another. In fact, this machismo, warlike attitude within the group is entirely contrary to everything that we should be struggling towards... —AMCC document: 1/30/77 (collection Ann-Marie Rousseau).

I noticed there were certain men or people who could say just about anything and everyone was ‘attentive’. Those who do the most work, those with the most responsibility, those with the most political sophistication and those who have a degree of establishment in the art field have the most “power.”...We live in a hierarchical world. The fact that some of it translates into PADD is obvious...—An open letter to PAD/D from a member: October, 1983

KL felt that there was a consensus from the last meeting that membership take active tasks....

LK felt that analyzing tasks would help redistribute work. She said that some people have resentment because they do not know where the task openings are.

KL said that tasks will shift given the projects we are working on....

PL thought we should take a look at who’s doing what and why.

HB wanted to understand how this list would related to project tasks.

TT thought that the person within a project ..could become the delegate to work in a general REPO working group.

LK felt that certain people end up doing too much of the work and this person would be doing twice the work...It is important that more people get involved in this decision.

REPOhistory minutes, January 4, 1993

The repetition demonstrated here is all the more remarkable when you consider that the selections span nearly twenty years and that the three group’s embrace overlapping membership. Obvious lessons might be drawn from this about the deficiency of not having a history or theory about collective practice, or how the burdens of decision making, divi-

sion of labor and power sharing are not mitigated simply because people choose to work cooperatively. Because activist art collectives are naturally suspicious of establishment politics, each new group tends to reinvent organizational processes already attempted or sometimes even abandoned by other similar institutions. Therefore what appears to be a blank screen on which to project some new radical form of self-government might better be understood as a surface so overly etched with traces of language, history, knowledge and material conditions that it merely appears empty. These traces cannot be navigated without first recognizing the way in which language and spatial metaphors are used, consciously or not, by the collective. The problem is similar to that characterized by Jacques Derrida in his essay “The Ends of Man: Reading Us,” first published in France in 1969. Questioning what paths lead to radical change the philosopher suggests there remain only:

...the choice between two strategies: a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain...[in which] one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (relever), at an always more certain depth, that which one deconstructs...” b. “To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside” [risking a form of] “tromp-l’oil perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted... —Derrida 135

Derrida’s solution to this dilemma insists that “A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once.” --But how can we remember and forget, repeat and interrupt, have a history as well as start over again? One possible answer is to map Derrida’s musings about ontology onto the very corporeal plurality of the activist art collective, to read it as a variegated body.

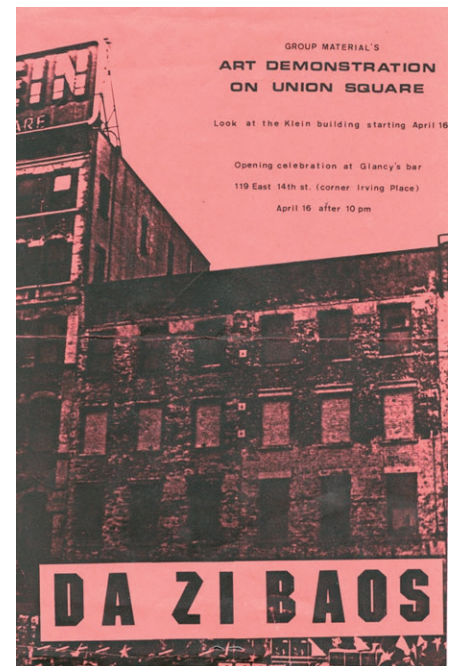
One main factor of this period [early 1980s] was its generosity in trying to include everyone-- artist and non-artist, good or bad art, etc. in exhibitions. This may be why [Lucy R.] Lippard’s writing at that time in my eyes was more documentation (in the sense of listing artists and artworks in a matter of fact way) of this growing subculture away from the art-market, and not criticism directed to judge the quality of a work of art.” —Todd Ayoun, NYC, 1999, artist and founding member of REPOhistory and Godzilla.

Certainly the contingencies Derrida enumerates play themselves out within and around the art collective including the unwitting consolidation of prevailing power relations --masculinist authority, over-centralization, bureaucracy-- and perhaps even more insidiously what



PAD/D or Political Art Documentation and Distribution circa 1983

Group Material Da Zi Baos guerilla project Union Square NYC, 1983



he calls a *tromp-l'oil* effect in which an imagined escape route is but a projection of present limitations. Nevertheless the exclusion of the collective, in particular the activist art collective, from within the larger cultural discourse (including what is termed “left” or Progressive) seems to indicate a potential for something necessarily uncomfortably, other and plural. If Derrida’s question of “who, we?” were posed to such a group entity the response would come as a shimmer of voices, historical narratives and political positions. Within the overflowingness of collective identity then are both figures of resistance and, something resembling what Derrida has recently termed a “certain experience of the promise.”

If Deleuze asserts “there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (Ibid) Derrida insists that “one can try to liberate [the promise] from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism.” He also states that “...a promise must be kept, that is, not to remain “spiritual” or “abstract,” but to produce effects, new effective forms of action, practice, organization, and so forth.” (Derrida, *Specters* 89). This anti-teleological potentiality is not unlike Jameson’s Political Unconscious or Benjamin’s moment of historical danger. And if the “promise” must be made concrete, it may indeed be glimpsed in the activist art collective’s inherent capacity for self-regulation, independent production and control over its own distribution. Undoubtedly this prospect is what is so anathema to the art market and its discourse. And because this capacity is latent within all productive activity, administrators and regulators, including the society of control, recognize and react against it. Ironically, the activist art collective often displays its own self-mastery with unregulated acts of production and aesthetic incontinence: two operations forbidden by an industry that depends upon the illusion of scarcity and the predictability of goods (the consistency of an artist’s style and nowadays her persona as well 4.) Perhaps this more than any imagined threat to a lingering ideology of artistic autonomy is what motivates the exclusion of collective practice from the critical discourse of art. A closer look at the mechanics of what Negri calls “self-valorization” may help decide this question

Carol Conde and Carl Beveridge, staged photo from the series *Calling the Shots*, 2002



Authorship was an interesting issue and any given piece was undercut by this transindividual author: Blue Funk. The overall result was a strange and liberating experience. We were like some multitracked techno recording that is indistinguishable in a given space. If we followed any model I doubt if we could agree on it maybe a band that is kept together by the tensions pulling it apart. — Brian Hand, Founding member of Blue Funk; a chiefly British state of great terror, Dublin, 1999.

Artistic self-valorization can be read as a re-appropriation directed against the market's need to reign in an artist's production and stylistic trademark. That self-restraint is virtually built into an artist's education and reiterated in one form or another within the marketplace through dealers, critics and even by other artists. However within the relative sanctuary of the group identity this pressure is meliorated to the point that being part of a collective often means experimenting with different styles and technologies that would otherwise be disruptive to one's career. Even more troubling from the point of view of the culture industry is the way in which self-valorization allows collectives to establish their own criteria about what is art and who can make art. Such aesthetic self-validation is typically extended, like stolen goods, from the collective to artists who have been locked-out of traditional venues for reasons of political or cultural content or simply because of the stinginess of the art market. This pilfered aesthetic aura is even transferable from the collective to non-artists who become ordained (provisionally) as bona fide aesthetic producers. In 1984 for example the feminist art collective *Carnival Knowledge* invited porn-stars to become artists for their exhibition entitled *The Second Coming* at Franklin Furnace. *Group Material* went so far as to use the frame of the museum to legitimate this self-endowed collective munificence. *Group Material's* 1989 project the *AIDS Timeline* included paintings and sculpture as well as bumper stickers, video tapes, t-shirts and news clippings. Thus the self-institutionalizing group-form offers-up evidence that control over the means of artistic production not only is not the exclusive domain of collectors and dealers, curators and critics, but it is they who have appropriated this role from artists themselves.

Finally, because all issues of aesthetics will ultimately get settled at the bank, we must ask if it is possible to collect the collective? Which is to say under what circumstances would the group signature --its minting or coinage if you like-- be capable of being possessed? Certainly specific objects produced by *Group Material*, the *Guerilla Girls*, *Gran Fury* and other collectives have found their way into museums, archives, and private collections. But this only raises the question differently: how can one comprehend artistic group authorship? The answer seems to depend upon the possibility of even conceiving such a thing as a group signature proper (as opposed to say a collection of signatures or gathering of styles). Such a thing, if it did exist, would openly dispute the fiction of the individual mark --that unique sign that guarantees the authors absence only by virtue of being infinitely repeatable. It leads us to question the economy of this seemingly unique mark, not only within the art industry and its discourse, but its function within all administered forms of collectivity including the *Society of Control*. If we were to answer that artistic value is determined today by a sphincter-like regulation of the



Handbook for collective action to take over the unfinished Nuclear power plant in Seabrook, New Hampshire 1979

individual mark with all that it represents, then considering what has been said about the excess and instability of group identity a collective signature would by definition be incomprehensible. Not unlike the grotesque truth of *The Matrix*, recognition of the collective condition demands its price, both individually and professionally.

Regarding the practice of collective, activist art, this essay is neither comprehensive nor conclusive. It is an open question as to whether the observations here can apply more broadly to other forms of cooperative work. The self-valorizing art collective, with all of its volatility and repetition may be resistant to Deleuze's *Society of Control* if for no other reason than its sheer generosity of material, aesthetic and political production. Overdetermined and discontinuous, the collective assembles the needs, affiliations, differences and even afflictions of others in a space suddenly open to the possibility of social equality and self-management. Even under the best circumstances the collective is fueled by these differences as well as destabilized by them. Still, if not for the intellectual and occasionally rapturous pleasure made available, uniquely I believe, through sustained and voluntary collective activity and undoubtedly linked to this same economy of displacement and re-appropriation, no one would ever ingest the red pill. After all, the art world is counting on your collective silence. ■

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NOTES

1. Undoubtedly the marketing potential for such a program is enormous, see: Robinson, Sara «Thousands of Undiscovered Web Communities» in *The New York Times*, (June 10, 1999), D3.

2. Critical Art Ensemble, «Observations on Collective Cultural Action» was originally published in *Art Journal*, (Summer 1998), pg. 73-85.

3. In this regard my essay is especially indebted to the decades-old interdisciplinary artist's collective REPOhistory whose current membership --Stephanie Basch, Neil Bogan, Jim Costanzo, Cynthia Liesenfeld, Tom Klem, Lisa Maya Knauer, Janet Koenig, Mark O'Brien, Jayne Pagnuccio, George Spencer, and Gregory Sholette--together with former members such as Todd Ayoung, Edward Eisenberg, Betti-Sue Hertz, Lucy Lippard, Carin Kuoni, Kara Lynch, Chris Neville, Liza Prown, Megan Pugh, Tess Timoney, Jodi Wright, and numerous transitory collaborators have informed my thinking and writing.

The questions asked of participants were as follows:

1. Describe one particular incident --from a crisis to a hilarious situation -- that represents some key feature of the process of working with others "beneath" a collective name/project:

2. Other than joint authorship what other aspects of collaborative work-- aesthetic, political, communal---set it apart from individual cultural production? (again you can use a specific example from your experience):
3. Are there any specific historical or theoretical models --pop cultural references, personal incentives--- of collaborative/collective work you feel relate to your own experiences?:
4. Any other thoughts or anecdotes you wish to add?:

4. On the politics of artistic “inclusiveness” see Gregory Sholette, “News from Nowhere: Activist Art & After: Report from New York” in *Third Text*, Spring: 1999. And for a critical discussion of the tendency by which artists “...embody (or at least speak for) any number of subject positions and identities, simply by virtue of being an artist.” see Grant H. Kester in “Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public” in *Art, Activism, & Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* ed. Grant H. Kester (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1988), p 126

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