

Collective Cultural Action

The Critical Art Ensemble



The totalizing belief that social and aesthetic value are encoded in the being of gifted individuals (rather than emerging from a process of *becoming* shared by group members) is cultivated early in cultural education. If one wants to become an "artist," there is a bounty of educational opportunities—everything from matchbook correspondence schools to elite art academies. Yet there is no place where one can prepare for a collective practice. At best, there are the rare examples where teams (usually partnerships of two) can apply as one for admission into institutions of higher learning. But once in the school, from administration to curriculum, students are forced to accept the ideological imperative that artistic practice is an individual practice.

The mechanisms to ensure that this occurs are too many to list here, but consider the spatial model of the art school: classrooms are designed to accommodate aggregates of specialists. Studios are designed to accommodate a single artist, or like the classroom, aggregates of students working individually. Rarely can a classroom be found that has a space designed for face-to-face group interaction. Nor are spaces provided where artists of various media can come together to work on project ideas. Then there is the presentation of faculty (primary role models) as individual practitioners. The institution rewards individual effort at the faculty level in a way similar to how students are rewarded for individual efforts through grades. Woe to the faculty members who go to the tenure review board with only collective efforts to show for themselves. Obviously, these reward systems have their effect on the cultural socialisation process.

On the public front, the situation is no better. If artists want grants for reasons other than being a non-profit presenter/producer, they better be working as individuals. Generally speaking, collective practice has no place in the grant system. Collectives reside in that liminal zone—they are neither an individual, nor an institution, and there are no other categories. Seemingly there is no place to turn. Collectives are not wanted in the public sphere, in the education system, nor in the cultural market (in the limited sense of the term), so why be so much in favour of collective cultural action?

Part of the answer once again has to do with market demands. Market imperatives are double-edged swords. First, the market wants individuals with lots of skills for maximum exploitation. An artist must be able to produce in a given medium, write well enough for publication, be verbally articulate, have a reasonable amount of knowledge of numerous disciplines, be a capable public speaker, a career administrator and possess the proper diplomatic skills to navigate through a variety of cultural sub-populations. Certainly some rare individuals do have all of these skills, but many can only meet these standards by working collectively. Second is the need for opportunity.

Given the number of trained artists adding to what—within the few platforms for distribution—is already an excessive population of cultural producers, the opportunity for a public voice has rapidly decreased. By specialising in a particular medium, one cuts the opportunities even further. The greater one's breadth of production skills, the more opportunity there is. Opportunity is also



expanded by breadth of knowledge. The more one knows, the more issues one can address. In a time when content has resurfaced as an object of artistic value, a broad interdisciplinary knowledge base is a must. And finally, opportunity can be expanded through the ability to address a wide variety of cultural spaces. The more cultural spaces that a person is comfortable working in, the more opportunity s/he has. If designed with these strategies in mind, collectives can configure themselves to address any issue or space, and they can use all types of media. The result is a practice that defies specialisation and pigeonholing.

Thirdly, the velocity of 'cultural economy' is a factor. The market can consume a product faster than ever before. Just in terms of quantity, collective action offers a tremendous advantage. By working in a group, members are able to resist the Warhol syndrome of factory production with underpaid labourers. Through collective action, product and process integrity can be maintained, while at the same time keeping abreast of market demand.

These considerations may sound cynical, and to a degree they are, but they appear as a reality which must be negotiated if one is to survive as a cultural producer. On the other hand, there is something significant about collective action that is rewarding beyond what can be understood through the utilitarian filters of economic survival.

Size Matters:

Cellular Collective Construction

One problem that seems to plague collective organisation is the group reaching 'critical mass': the point where the group breaks up, and little or nothing can be left of the organisation. The reasons for this vary depending on the function and intention of the group. Our experience has been that with larger artists'/activists' groups, once membership rises into the hundreds, a number of conflicts and contradictions emerge that cause friction. For one thing, tasks become diversified. Not everyone can participate fully in each task, so committees are formed to focus on specific tasks. The group thus moves from a direct process to a representational process. This step toward bureaucracy conjures feelings of separation and mistrust that can be deadly to group action, and that are symptomatic of the failure of overly rationalised democracy. To complicate matters further, different individuals enter the group with differing levels of access to resources. Those with the greatest resources tend to have a larger say in group activities. Consequently, minorities form that feel under-represented and powerless to compete with majoritarian views and methods. (Too

often, these minorities reflect the same minority structure found in culture as a whole). Under such conditions, group splintering (or annihilation) is bound to occur. The worst-case scenario is the formation of a power base that tightens the bureaucratic rigor in order to purge the group of malcontents, and to stifle difference.

Such problems can also occur at a smaller group level (15 to 50 members). While these smaller groups have an easier time avoiding the alienation that comes from a complex division of labour and impersonal representation, there still can be problems, such as the perception that not everyone has an equal voice in group decisions, or that an individual is becoming the signature voice of the group. Another standard problem is that the level of intimacy necessary to sustain passionately driven group activity rarely emerges in a midsize group. The probability is high that someone, for idiosyncratic reasons, is not going to be able to work with someone else on a long-term basis. These divisions cannot be organised or rationalised away. Much as the large democratic collective is good for short-term, limited issue political and cultural action, the midsize group seems to function best for short-term, specific issue cultural or political projects.

For sustained cultural or political practice free of bureaucracy or other types of separating factors, we recommend a cellular structure. Thus far the artists' cell that typifies contemporary collective activity has formed in a manner similar to band society. Solidarity is based on similarity in terms of skills and political/aesthetic perceptions. Most of the now classic cellular collectives of the 70s and 80s, such as Ant Farm, General Idea, Group Material, Testing the Limits (before it splintered), and Gran Fury used such a method with admirable results. Certainly these collectives' models for group activity are being emulated by a new generation.

While size and similarity through political/aesthetic perspective can replicate itself in the group, members need not share a similarity based on skill. Each member's set of skills can be unique to the cell. Consequently, in terms of production, solidarity is not based on similarity, but on difference. The parts are interrelated and interdependent. Technical expertise is given no chance to collide and conflict, and hence social friction is greatly reduced.

Solidarity through difference also affects the structure of power in the group. Formerly, collective structure tended to be based on the idea that all members were equals at all times. Groups had a fear of hierarchy, because it was considered a categorical evil that led to domination. This notion was coupled with a belief in extreme democracy as the best method of avoiding hierarchy.

While CAE does not follow the democratic model, the collective does recognise its merits; however, we follow Foucault's principle that hierarchical power can be productive (and not necessarily lead to domination), and hence use a floating hierarchy to produce projects. After consensus is reached on how a project should be produced, the member with the greatest expertise in the area has authority over the final product. While all members have a voice in the production process, the project leader makes the final decisions. This keeps endless discussion over who has the better idea or design to a minimum, and hence the group can produce at a faster rate. Projects tend to vary, so the authority floats



among the membership.

At the same time, we would not recommend this process for any social constellation other than the cell (3 to 8 people). Members must be able to interact in a direct face-to-face manner, so everyone is sure that they have been heard as a person (and not as an anonymous or marginalised voice). Second, the members must trust one another; that is, sustained collective action requires social intimacy and a belief that the other members have each individual member's interests at heart. A recognition and understanding of the non-rational components of collective action is crucial—without it, the practice cannot sustain itself.

The collective has to consider what is pleasurable for its members. Not all people work at the same rate. The idea that everyone should do an equal amount of work is to measure a member's value by quantity instead of quality. As long as the process is pleasurable and satisfying for everyone, in CAE's opinion, each member should work at the rate at which they are comfortable. Rigid equality in this case can be perverse and destructive and should be avoided. To reinforce the pleasure of the group, convivial relationships beyond the production process are necessary. The primary reason for this need is because the members will intensify bonds of trust and intimacy that will later be positively reflected in the production process. Intimacy produces its own peculiar friction, but the group has a better chance of surviving the arguments and conflicts that arise, as long as in the final analysis each member trusts and can depend on fellow members. Collective action requires total commitment to other members, and this is a frightening thought for many individuals. Certainly, collective practice is not for everyone.

Coalitions, Not Communities

While cellular collective structure is very useful in solving problems of production, long-term personal co-operation, and security (for those involved in underground activities), like all social constellations, it has its limits. It does not solve many of the problems associated with distribution, nor can it fulfil the functions of localised cultural and political organisations. Consequently, there has always been a drive toward finding a social principle that would allow like-minded people or cells to organise into larger groups.

Currently, the dominant principle is 'community.' Without doubt the liberal equivalent of the conservative notion of 'family values'—neither exists in contemporary culture, and both are grounded in political fantasy. For example, the "gay community" is a term often used to refer to all people who are gay within a given territory. Even in a localised context, gay men and women populate all social strata, so it is very hard to believe that this aggregate functions as a community within such a complex society. To complicate matters further, social variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, education, profession, and other points of difference are not likely to be lesser points of identification than the characteristic of being gay. A single shared social characteristic can in no way constitute a community in any sociological sense. Talking about a gay community is as silly as talking about a 'straight community.' The word 'community' is only meaningful in this case as a euphemism for 'minority.' The closest social constellation to a community that does exist are friendship networks, but those too fall short of being communities in any sociological sense.

Who really wants community in the first place, as it contradicts the politics of difference. Solidarity based on similarity through shared ethnicity, and interconnected familial networks supported by a shared sense of place and history, work against the possibility of power through diversity by maintaining closed social systems. This is not to say that there are no longer relative-



ly closed social sub-systems within society. There are, but they differ from community in that they are products of rationalised social construction and completely lack social solidarity. In order to bring people together from different sub-systems who share a similar concern, hybrid groups have to be intentionally formed. These groups are made up of people who are focusing their attention on one or two characteristics that they share in common, and who put potentially conflicting differences aside. This kind of alliance, created for purposes of large-scale cultural production and/or for the visible consolidation of economic and political power, is known as a coalition.

CAE has supported a number of coalitions in the past, including various ACT UP chapters and PONY (Prostitutes of New York), and has organised temporary localised ones as well. One of the problems we had with such alliances was in negotiating service to the coalition while maintaining its collective practice. Coalitions often consume as much energy as a person is willing to put into them; hence membership burnout is quite common. After a few years of this variety of activism, members were ready to retreat back into less visible cellular practice. CAE began looking for a model of coalition different from the single issue model.

One potential answer has come by way of our affiliation with Nettime, a loosely knit coalition of activists, artists, theorists, techies, collectives, and organisations from Europe and North America that have come together for reasons of generalised support for radical cultural and political causes*. It has approximately 700 members, and has existed for about six years. Nettime functions as an information, distribution, and recruitment resource for its members. The core of its existence is virtual: member contact is maintained through an online list, various newsgroups, and an archive. In addition, the coalition holds occasional conferences (the first two, Metaforum I and II, were held in Budapest in 1995 and 1996; Beauty and the East was held in Ljubljana in 1997), produces and contributes to cultural projects (such as Hybrid Workspace at Documenta X), acts as a resource for various political actions, and produces books from its archive (such as README: ASCII Culture and the Revenge of Knowledge).

From CAE's perspective, one of the elements that makes Nettime a more pleasurable experience is that unlike most coalitions, it is anarchistic rather than democratic. Nettime has no voting procedures, committee work, coalition officers, nor any of the markers of governance through representation. Hierarchy emerges in accordance with who is willing to do the work. Those who are willing to run the list have the most say over its construction. At the same time, the general policy for coalition maintenance is "tools not rules." Those building the virtual architecture govern by providing space for discussions that are not of general interest to the entire list. They also direct the flow of information traffic. Whatever members want to do—there is a place to do it. For events in real space, the primary rule of "those who do the work have the biggest say" still applies. Indeed, there is considerable room for exploitation in such a system, yet this does not occur with much frequency because members have sufficient trust in and allegiance to other members; the coalition as a whole won't tolerate system abuse (such as spamming, or self-aggrandising use of the list); and there is a self-destruct fail-safe—members would jump ship

at the first sign of ownership and/or permanent hierarchy.

Perhaps the real indicator of the congeniality shared by Nettime members is its cultural economy: it functions as an information gift economy. Articles and information are distributed free of charge to members by those who have accumulated large information assets. Nettimers often see significant works on the intersections of art, politics, and technology long before these works appear in the publications based on money economy. For real space projects, this same sense of voluntarism pervades all activities. What is different here from other cultural economies is that gift economy is only demanding on those who have too much. No one is expected to volunteer until they suffer or burn out. The volunteers emerge from among those who have excessive time, labour power, funding, space, or some combination thereof, and need to burn it off to return to equilibrium. Consequently, activity waxes and wanes depending on the situations and motivations of the members.

Problems certainly occur. However, Nettime is still the most congenial large-scale collective environment in which CAE has ever worked. The reason is that this loose coalition began with the romantic principle of accepting non-rational characteristics. It believed that a large collective could exist based on principles of trust, altruism, and pleasure; rather than on the Hobbesian assumption of the war of all against all, or an overvaluation of the organisational principles of accountability and categorical equality. Nettime functions using just one fail-safe system—self-destruction—it skips all the alienating bureaucracy necessary for managing endless accountability procedures. If Nettime self-destructs, all members will walk away whole, and will look for new opportunities for collective action. An alliance with the temporary is one of Nettime's greatest strengths.

Final Thought

Although they are in a secondary position in terms of cultural organisational possibilities, cells and coalitions still present a viable alternative to individual cultural practices. Collective action solves some of the problems of navigating market-driven cultural economy by allowing the individual to escape the skewed power relationships between the individual and the institution. More significantly, however, collective action also helps alleviate the intensity of alienation born of an overly rationalised culture by recreating some of the positive points of friendship networks within a productive environment. For this reason artists' research into alternative forms of social organisation is just as important as the traditional research into materials, processes, and products.

*The description of the Nettime coalition given in this essay is solely from CAE's perspective. It was not collectively written nor approved by the Nettime membership.

Critical Art Ensemble (C.A.E.) is a collective of six artists of different specializations committed to the production of a new genre art that explores the intersections among critical theory, art and technology.

<http://critical-art.net/>

