

P R E S E N C E

A N D

A B S E N C E

I N

C R O W D S

Presence and Absence in Crowds
by Michael Eddy

The more each of us gets into the other's person, the less of a person each of us is to the audience: we are not 'persons' but 'representatives' (of a mystery, of an interaction ritual, of a psychology...)
- Vito Acconci

independence/
autonomy/institutional
ization/ absorption/
ownness...possessive
individualism...boring
individualism...what
deprives us from
ownness?
making little of myself
but this little is
everything. Ownness
or Onus?

Paying heed to even wider sections of the contemporary art world one notices there is no stigma attached to collective work, except perhaps by certain collectives or critics who label it as en vogue. Or should one employ the term 'lament' to describe the tone of art groups come of age in the last decade or two, noting the passing from 'independent' to 'institutionalized?' Perhaps as the perennial inheritor of paradise lost, I am projecting. For something must prompt the question: "But why are collectives so attractive to the institutions nowadays?"¹ and I simply refuse to believe the aura of authenticity exhausts the discussion as a concept or as an answer. I think it is important to look at a few of the many ways that groups operate, and the implications of these methodologies.

Value for money

What about
withdrawal? This is
Robert, now it is
Michael.

As an entry point, I should like to declare that writing and clear communication are decisive characteristics within a collaboration – that is, if they are used at all. While assuring you that the relation between identifying intention and acting can be at its most banal in a collective situation, it certainly doesn't have to be a part of the practice at all - there are artists who talk and those who don't - but this does have significance for the kind of work that is made, all the more for a group. Practices that involve distance, for example, with members spread across the world, are much more amenable to the written word. Writing even implies absence, the possibility that one's internal memo's could be hijacked by another party, or slip into a crevice of time, recovered and executed in the future.²

silence is never
withdrawal

Who is You? Where
are we in this
rendering of context?

Looking back to when the possibilities of distributing art (as information) seemed most promising: when books were first conceived as proper group exhibitions and faxes and contracts assumed art object status, the emphasis was on democratization. The shifting of function from artist to clerk was seen as reducing the division between author and audience, while it has also been spoken of as internalizing aspects of a "totally administered world".³ I wonder in the case of collective activities if mechanisms are simply scaled up from the clerk figure to fit an engine with more cogs (an army of automatons), or if the bureaucracy involved is of a different nature. The use of writing in the early activities of Art & Language was utilized with the express aim of criticizing "bureaucratization and new corporate marketing techniques (involving art criticism, the trade [art] journals, galleries and museums, art schools and all)"⁴; so a critique of the means of distribution and justification (in short, of the institution) while using these standardized means. The significance of a collective endeavour can reside in a chorus of disagreement and an examination of roles, as opposed to an amplification of identity.

democracy; is there
such a thing?

Better of this than
these obscene and
embarrassing parades
of uniformity &
branding, corporate
logics used by
most groups
acronyms, fantasies,
short hand

"I wonder" --every
email used to start
this way, not
anymore.

1. Mirjam Thomann's question to Stephan Geene, Jutta Koether, Markus Müller, Bernadette Van-Huy and Antek Walczak in "You are not Alone" (Texte Zur Kunst September, 2006), p. 158.

2. See Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

3. The term is Theodor Adorno's, referenced in Benjamin Buchloh's 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions'. The article is useful, though it never mentions collaborative practices per se. *October*, Vol. 55, Winter, 1990 (Winter, 1990), (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA) pp. 105-143.

4. Andrew Menard, "Are you not doing what you're doing while you're doing what you are" (1975). In: *The Fox* (New York) No. 3; pp. 38 ff.



Artist as Manager,
obfuscates artist as
mystico /individual
p a r a d i g m

It is relevant that Sol Lewitt, as an acknowledged trailblazer in the re-definition of the artist in avoidance of subjectivity, precludes chance, (as well as "taste or unconsciously remembered forms") as having anything to do with this role, in published statements from 1966.⁵ Matter of factly, the structure we see is the intention followed through and presented - the consequences for authorship seem to be the elimination of qualifiers like talent and virtuosity, replacing them with procedures that nearly anybody could fulfil. Meanwhile, George Brecht had in his writing on chance operations in the very same year called on chance toward the elimination of taste in artistic matters. Brecht located chance imagery "in the same conceptual category as natural chance-images (the configuration of meadow grasses, the arrangement of stones on a brook bottom), and to get away from the idea that an artist makes something 'special' and beyond the world of ordinary things."⁶ In many of the activities of Fluxus, a chance operation follows a preliminary 'premise' (the term is in fact Lewitt's), an instruction or score to be carried out; Fluxus as a group is almost incomprehensible without this element of the consciously accidental. The differences between Lewitt's statements and Fluxus are glaring - as glaring as the similar goal of avoiding the terms of taste. This battle on "biases engrained in our personality by our culture and personal past history"⁷ that chance operations were deployed to assist of course had its particular historical and rhetorical context, namely the intention and genius of expressionist, formalist modes.⁸ What resulted was a heterogeneous, but also conflicting version of collective work; it would be unfair to idealize the problems of Fluxus as disharmonies composing and circumscribed by a single harmony (as one does for any troubled collective). And after the promises of telecommunications to 'revolutionize' the world - namely through democratization of information - haven't exactly turned out the way we hoped, it is time to interrogate the values of chance and indifference that a category like absence brings up.⁹ Especially within the expanding systems of contemporary art, with objects and people whirling about in imitation of ever-accelerating electronically disseminated words and images, the fruits of absence can today rightfully be called into question as apogetic of this circulation.

Roger Cailliois
equating accident,
organic growth and
mold with the fruits
of a project.

Maybe more naive
than unfair?

should there be
decisiveness in this
equation? and
what about
accumulation of
dispossession?

The call of nature - the ins and outs of bodies - where communal life restores itself, is a variant of the 'everyday' that keeps authors reminded of their ties to context.¹⁰ Some artists have based their practices on the level of feeding and resting oneself, on the public space of the table. At the same time, the practice of creating functional spaces of food, drink and discourse calls for a redefinition of exhibition-making, stretching the logistical capacities of standard art spaces. The social is constituted as a necessary aspect of the work, where before it had been a side-benefit.¹¹ Collective production is seemingly left to its devices; through the presence and occupation of others, authorship is redistributed. Perhaps the offer is always there - to actually reinvent an artwork as a co-author - but here absorption in various senses blurs the distinction between creation and consumption. I must admit my tendency to read documentation of (even participation in) such events anthropologically, scanning the faces of participants to gauge satisfaction and success in the piece. Although the work ostensibly involves a freedom from behavioural restrictions, the little slice of utopia seems at the same time a surveillance society. I wonder how far one could interpret this form of artwork in terms of its articulation of this double state.

re-distribution of
the fungus

Here, now

The Third Policeman

utopia / discipline,
where is analysis?

5. Sol Lewitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," Aspen Magazine, no. 5-6, ed. Brian O'Doherty, 1967, np.

6. George Brecht, Chance Imagery (originally released as a Great Bear Pamphlet by Something Else Press, 1966; available: www.ubu.com), p. 12.

In his Notes on Sculpture, Robert Morris points to automation as a process that imitates nature and eliminates taste.

7. Brecht, Chance Imagery, p. 23.

8. To this end, the Fluxus concept of 'intermedia' is also crucial - furthermore, it is interesting that integral to this process of defining themselves as a collective was the establishment of a parallel, mail-order market for their multiples - chance as commercial farce.

9. Slavoj Zizek: "So, within these coordinates, what does the passage from the factory production to the "postindustrial" production in which workers are again isolated and can even work at home, behind their computer screen, mean?" Repeating Lenin (available: <http://www.lacan.com/replenin.htm>).

10. 'Everyday life': which Henri Lefebvre calls "programmed consumption". The Production of Space, p. 89.

11. "Furthermore, when has art, at least since the Renaissance, not involved discursivity and sociability? It is a matter of degree, of course, but might this emphasis be redundant? It also seems to risk a weird formalism of discursivity and sociability pursued for their own sakes. Collaboration, too, is often regarded as a good in itself: 'Collaboration is the answer,' Obrist remarks at one point, 'but what is the question?'" Hal Foster in "Chat Rooms" in Participation, p 194.



who is international art system? lessons in normativity

instrumentalize group for sake of socialbility?

here he means, getting ahead of the collective.

I heard the word post-studio uttered in this exact gallery space without any irony at all.

the virtuoso drunk

back to ownness - collaboration using commodity against commodity

self fashioning; the clown; the intellectual; the party animal; the ingrate

friend/enemy?

From another angle, it has been suggested that there is potential in presence to throw off the norms of expected behaviour, specifically those dictated by an international art system.¹² Through the use of dialect common to the local, or references to a narrative that favours the particular, a certain realm of independence is established, in resistance (or indifference) to the terms set by a fickle 'art world'. A necessary tone of defiance, I agree: but how close do we have to go? The group of friends: this constellation of individuals is prized precisely because it is not a microcosm; its structures, developed ad hoc and based on specific personae, cannot easily be enlarged to lay as a framework over a bigger domain. Is there some bastion of autonomy only in such contained denominations? The risk here is to conceive of this structure as an organic entity, unaffected by the artifice of the lingua franca (the independence of youth culture is invoked as a grouping glued by desires that transgress the norms of the art business;¹³ the motifs of rock and roll, drugs and sex have on the other hand attained cooptation to a comical degree). Returning to the term "nature": used in a colloquial sense, it can also indicate similarity of taste or presence: as in "it's only natural that they work well together, being that they are friends." And the institution of art tacitly celebrates this definition.

Before I get ahead of myself, let me clarify - while art and artists are implicated in a network of distances and absences, in which the historical concept of 'democratization' begins ever more to resemble 'consumerization', presence does not become an antique term, but a shifted one. It now draws from a broader understanding than the presence of Michael Fried's Art and Objecthood, in which minimal art was accused of negating art via its theatricality; and it doesn't quite fit the presence made up of absences and lack of signification that Douglas Crimp found in Pictures. In a much more mundane and pragmatic fashion, presence in much contemporary art refers to the appearance and performance of the artist's person in a social occasion, making specific connections. And so despite the prevalence of technological means to communicate precisely over vast territories and with huge numbers of individuals, the most pivotal moments of production happen in intimate circumstances.¹⁴ In art especially, this is partly due to the dependence of artists on other segments of the art world: curators, collectors, writers, etc. This stratification of roles needs a theatre; somehow, tangents must meet, as in fact the independent curators are just as dependent on the artists as vice versa. With so much networking imperative, leisure time is show time. Performance is not only a form unto itself; it is not only the reflection of everyday life that Fluxus tried to bring about through art, but the everyday life that invades art.

The power involved in these exchanges has special ramifications for collaborative groups, as presence is multiplied - internally within the group as well as in interaction with all other parties. This is the specific dilemma (or advantage) of groups: that the manner in which collaborators operate between each other is just as well constitutive of the work's meaning. Theatricality is a thread that runs through the relation to materials, the comportment within the group, and the demeanour expressed outwardly; production happens as a shuttling between these levels. To be sure, I have done no justice here to practices that feature silence or non-verbal comprehensions of space (the light in a room at a certain time of day, the placement and re-placement of an object in relation to other objects); however, I want to insist that we cannot reduce any approach to the starting point for all other recognitions or interactions. It is true that as a mechanism, the collaboration of friends in one another's presence can function more efficiently than a drawn out correspondence or a practice heavy with bureaucratic-conceptual frameworks: when like and like cooperate, decisions can be taken faster, disagreements avoided, chemistry is in the air. I would qualify this by pointing to the uncanny resemblance that efficiency here bears to a general art world efficiency of movement, in which friendship is also entangled, and yet would conceit to overcome.

12. I am thinking, for example, of a lecture at the Staedelschule by Dr. Neil Mulholland (Wednesday, May 16th, 2007) which addressed the possibilities of 'artwriting' to go beyond "normative tropes of advocacy, representation and critique by revisiting theories of mise en scene and metafiction." (From Mulholland's abstract.)

13. "If art was only business, then rock expressed that transcendental, religious yearning for communal, nonmarket aesthetic feeling that official art denied. For a time during the seventies, rock culture became the religion of the avant-garde art world." Dan Graham, Rock my Religion, p. 94.

14. "Whereas in a first moment, in the computerization of industry, for example, one might say that communicative action, human relations, and culture have been instrumentalized, reified, and "degraded" to the level of economic interactions, one should add quickly that through a reciprocal process, in this second moment, production has become communicative, affective, de-instrumentalized, and "elevated" to the level of human relations - but, of course, a level of human relations entirely dominated by and internal to capital." Michael Hardt, "Affective Labour" in boundary 2, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer, 1999; Duke University Press), p 96.

Is an audience of collective works the most fickle of a | | ?

I can't admit this is the first time I've heard of it.

Collaboration as parallel universe.

3 vs 1

friendship & fidelity

central vs
peripheral; the
group consists of
others, a de-
propertied
signature; a mass of
readings; a mass of
inscriptions

Should I just be
fingering
bones of
contention, or
indicating support
as well?
I suppose lack of
comment equals
tacit
agreement?

Vito Acconci again
"...I paid attention
to phrases like, "A
person who lives by
the sword dies by
the sword." In other
words, if a project
starts out as
private, it ends
private; if
something is meant
to be public, it
better start at least
as a semi-public
project. Now, one is
private, and two is
a couple, a mirror
image, but three is
a crowd; three
spoils the couple,
so it must be the
beginning of
public..."

I feel I am approaching a territory beyond my means to completely understand, let alone chart out - that of friendship. It is in this space that battles are fought out between usefulness and amour fou, between otherness and identity. Friendship in art could be seen as regarding and respecting vastly other practices from one's own, in much the same way that one accepts the outcome of a dice's toss, even to one's 'detriment'; in other cases, it could be seen as helping others help oneself. Is it necessary for collaboration? Certainly the popularity for collectives to apply the branding logic of private companies indicates with some amount of irony that business has more than a little to do with it. Collaboration, however, can often invite in aspects from 'everyday life' that seem to substitute intimacy's instrumental efficiency for its patience and sense of time - say, when one member falls silent for a spell, or the twists and turns of life prohibit concerted production - this, more than a naturally similar bearing, is what I understand as the contribution of friendship to collaboration.

How, in the end, do we answer that initial question: "But why are collectives so attractive to the institutions nowadays?" It is a question that exposes presumptions of why artists come together, and the relationship of artists to institutions. Collectives - in an extended family that includes collaborations, co-operations, and groups - referred to here as a niche figure in an 'institution' that now spans from schools to artist-run spaces to biennales to art fairs.¹⁵ Rather than a tale of unrequited attraction, the two terms, collective and institution, could be seen to want to pull together with mutual and reflective force like a gazer toward a pond's surface, nearly to become mistaken one for the other. The collective constructs forms of organization that might seem a redundancy or duplication from the point of view of the institution. The relay races of discussion, conflict and/or agreement that hammer out the shape of collectives are an anticipation of the discourses that institutions come to represent. Perhaps as institutions struggle with the same inter-personal forces that I have described above in terms of collaboration, it becomes necessary for them to engage the potential of collectives to represent the problems and - I would hope - to imagine counter-models.

Too generous. Too often the role of this kind of mimetic irony (mimicking the branding or structure of corporate, social or historical organisations) is left unresolved within the practice and acts as a banal convention. Walt Disney or Art Worker's Coalition?

Last night I wasn't sure about the metaphoric (similic?) resonance here.

public & counter
public

15. Broadly and aptly described by Maria Lind's "The Collaborative Turn" in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands* (Black Dog Press, London, 2007).

KNOWLES EDDY KNOWLES, 2009

