ALLIANCE OF ARTISTS COMMUNITIES

Artist Collectives and the Changing Landscape of Residencies

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Collective practice in art can be traced back to avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Dada and the Situationists. As 20th century artists began to challenge the authority of the art object, artistic endeavors focused on process and interaction, not as mere means to an end but as the end product itself. In the last several decades, this trend in art has merged with a long history of collective organizing in social, political and economic realms. Many artists now choose to center their artistic practice around relationship-building and political organizing rather than object-making.This means contemporary artists are collaborating with each other and with professionals from other fields in diverse and innovative ways. Perhaps as a counter to the individualism and competition of our current culture, there seems to be a growing interest in collectivism today. The sustained impulse of artists to work together is beginning to be articulated and documented as a significant trend in art making.

At its most basic level, artist collectives are defined as small groups of artists who work toward shared aims. Participants often represent multiple disciplines, backgrounds and approaches that contribute to the collective assets of the group.

While artists' residencies are traditionally thought of as isolated retreats for solitary artists, there are actually a number of programs that serve artists' collectives specifically, and many more that welcome groups working collaboratively. During the Alliance of Artists Communities' Annual Conference in Pittsburgh in November, the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry presented a panel discussion to highlight the important contribution of artist collectives and to consider how artists' communities could better serve these artists.

The STUDIO for Creative Inquiry is a research center that supports interdisciplinary projects, bringing together the arts, sciences, technology and humanities. The STUDIO also supports projects that connect with local communities. Over the years, this mission has naturally resulted in engagement with a diverse group of artist collectives, shedding light on their critically engaged and collaborative approach.



Jim Costanzo with REPOhistory, *Lower Manhattan Sign Project*.

In 2002, with support from Carnegie Mellon University, the National Endowment for the Arts, The Heinz Endowments, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the STUDIO initiated the Collective Artist Residency Project. This $150,000 project supported two artists in year-long residencies, including salary, travel and relocation funding, a project budget of $5,000 each, general administrative support, and project documentation.

The Alliance's Annual Conference fortuitously coincided with the conclusion of the Collective Artist Residency Project, and presented an opportunity to encourage increased awareness and support for collectives by leading a discussion about the benefits and challenges of working with collectives. The panel, titled "Creativity in Collective," brought together five artists representing highly accomplished artist collectives: Jim Costanzo of REPOhistory, a New York City-based collective that produced public art projects between 1989 and 2001; Carl DiSalvo of Carbon Defense League, one of the groups supported by the STUDIO's Collective Artist Residency Project; Dara Greenwald, a founding member of the Pink Bloque radical feminist dance troupe, among other collective efforts; John Leanos of Burning Wagon Collective, a group of artists, animators,

composers and filmmakers working in San Francisco; and Hyla Willis of subRosa, a group of cyber-feminist researchers who investigate the effects of biotechnology on women's bodies and lives.

Collectives take many forms in the world of contemporary art and they define their collectivity in a variety of ways. Some artists share similar technical and aesthetic approaches; while they create artwork independently, they exhibit under a collective title. Other groups form to reap the economic benefit of shared studio space and other resources. The STUDIO supports collectives whose members actively collaborate to conceive and execute projects, and the panelists each employ this integrated approach. The collectives represented also share an interest in addressing social and political issues through their artwork. This means the groups often work outside of gallery and museum spaces, choose media and tactics based on the specific needs of each project and create alliances with a variety of non-art organizations such as activist groups, community associations, and trade unions.

Artists were asked how collective practice impacts their relationships with art-world institutions, and the panel unanimously identified the archetype of the individual artist as a major challenge. Dara Greenwald noted her experience at a residency center based on the retreat model, where access by the public is not permitted. Though she undertook the residency to focus on solo work, she felt unable to produce in isolation. Greenwald felt her retreat experience reinforced a "myth, which still exists today, that the artist needs to be out in the woods, in a cabin so everything can just come out. But nothing can come out of me in that situation." For artists whose work is relational and discursive, social interaction is often vital to the creative process. John Leanos agreed that "all of what we create emerges from a collective sense, that being the social." While residency programs aim to facilitate creative growth by eliminating distractions, they may also run the risk of affirming a narrow view of the artist as an isolated genius who must recede from society in order to create, if they fail to consider the diversity of artistic processes employed by today's artists.

Connectivity and discourse come in many forms and residencies offer a variety of models for artists of different approaches. For example, more than 85% of Alliance member organizations have some form of public programming in conjunction with their residency program, though many make participation in these programs optional for artists-in-residence or conduct programming off-site so as to maintain the privacy of the residency. For those residencies based on the isolated retreat model (roughly one-third of US residencies), most offer significant interaction with other artists-in-residence that often provides creative stimuli and unplanned collaborations.

While roughly half of artists' residency programs are open to collectives and collaborative groups, the percentage of group residencies is much smaller. One challenge in accepting collectives lies in the selection process. Some residencies review collective members individually, rather than as a group, as a means of determining the qualifications of each participant. However, collectives are often comprised of artists of different experience levels and career stages. Assessing individual rather than group qualifications therefore presents an obstacle to collectives that include less experienced members. Hyla Willis proposed that while an emerging artist may not have an extensive track record, the recommendation of an experienced collaborator should carry some weight: "Place more trust in the judgment of an experienced artist who chooses to work with a less established person."



Hyla Willis of subRosa, ***DIY Cell Lab*****.**

Another challenge collectives face is finding support for projects that include non-artist collaborators. Carl DiSalvo made an example of his project that involves mapping technology. "We have to work with a GIS expert. They don't have a portfolio," he noted. The tensions of pursuing interdisciplinary projects within art institutions prompted Carbon Defense League to move outside the art world, where DiSalvo said they've had "great response working with community groups, because they seem to understand that you can't get anything done yourself." Pamela Winfrey of the Exploratorium in San Francisco spoke up in agreement and acknowledged the obstacles that collectives currently face. (The Exploratorium is a museum of science, art and human perception that hosts individual and group residencies.) Winfrey made the persuasive case that "as residencies we have to understand that art practice is changing in certain realms and that we need to start thinking differently in terms of our jury process…. I think that it's really important for people to start rethinking this model of individual artist."

For Greenwald "part of the challenge for collectives at this point in our society is having the time to be together to develop ideas…. The benefit of a collective

residency would be spending time together in a focused way, where members aren't going off to this job and that job." The priority placed on the individual over collective achievement in the art world is a reflection of society's values in general and persists despite collective projects that are addressing significant social issues in new and effective ways. As Winfrey states, "conceptual problem solving is actually going to bring a real benefit to our communities." The environment that residencies provide—one that supports experimentation and risk-taking in community with other creative individuals—is particularly conducive to the process-oriented practice and alternative models of social interaction employed by artist collectives.

Limited financial resources present difficult choices to residency programs. For example, supporting a collective group of five artists working together on one project or supporting five individual artists working on five different projects may incur the same cost to the organization, while suggesting significantly different potential for outcome and long-term impact. Though supporting a collective may appear to be less significant in terms of number of projects supported, Jim Costanzo noted that residency programs "could be getting more if they take that leap of faith or that opportunity. The kind of artwork they get will be so different than [that] of several individuals."



Dara Greenwald, *Victorian Stroll*.

DiSalvo has found that "even if there is a desire to support collectives, there is always a material, monetary constraint." The STUDIO looks for ways to support the spirit of collectivity even if they cannot financially support every collective member. During the Collective Artist Residency Project, the STUDIO was only able to provide full-time salaries for two artists; however, they offered workspace, administrative support and the title of "associate fellow" to every member of the supported projects. According to DiSalvo, a current fellow in the STUDIO, having "space, administrative support and technical support distributed across our collective goes a long way to make collective work happen." Embracing all members of a collective, regardless of experience level, also supports a system of mentorship that improves the sustainability of collective art practice.

In the introduction to the third edition of the Alliance's *Artists' Communities: A Directory of Residencies*, Robert MacNeil of The MacDowell Colony describes artists' communities as "the most nourishing patrons of artists." If we want to continue to fulfill this role, we must "stay ahead of the curve" as Angela Beeching of the New England Conservatory of Music suggested and "think about how the field is changing." The number of artists and others working together is significant and warrants consideration. While the challenges to existing programs in serving artists' collectives are often daunting, the problem-solving capacity of these groups can serve to provide influence to and inspiration for residencies interested in re-evaluating their facilities, programming, and service to contemporary artists.

A complete report on the Collective Artists Residency Project is available by contacting the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry — www.cmu.edu/studio. •

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