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## Collective Action in the New Millennium: From Euphoria to Catharsis



Escoitar (Vigo), Sonic Weapons, Rome, 2010. Courtesy of the artists.

By Janet Batet

On Tuesday, May 12, South Florida environmental activists invaded the beaches of Miami Beach in an extraordinary procession. Dozens of activists broke through the peaceful, clear cloudless sky, covering tourists with sheets of black plastic, which like a gloomy cloak astonished them by inopportune interrupting their sun bathing. Their performance -an effective allegory of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, whose magnitude as an ecological catastrophe is already in sad evidence-sought to raise the consciousness of the average citizen regarding the dangers of offshore drilling.

The gesture brought to mind an inevitable formal analogy: the 1983 actions of Christo and Jeanne-Claude in Miami, *Surrounded Islands*. Those actions also had ecological implications. More than forty tons of garbage were removed from the coastline before bright pink fabric that contrasted with the color of the local vegetation and crystal-clear waters was placed, paying tribute to the lifestyle of area residents.

At the same time, the correspondence between the two actions places into relief some of the more widespread controversies surrounding today's collaborative art. The first of them relates directly to the nature of the gesture, which limits certain actions to the social or artistic sphere. The second is the vital need for alternative communication channels, avoiding worn-out traditional mechanisms and shaking up select audiences, inviting them to become aware and actively participate as social and cultural entities.

### ART AS ENTELECHY: SYMBOL, SYMPTOM AND DECADENCE

Art as symbolic autonomous production has fallen into decline. The notions that underpinned its inherent emphatic logic have become an empty subterfuge and the modern artistic canon, a fallacy. The concept of the artist as a genius and the notion of art tied to achievement has broken down since the end of the nineteenth century. Collective action and a participatory sense of art with direct social implications prevail.

In this sense, French nineteenth century bohemianism, as far as counterculture and collective action were concerned, became essential. To this movement we owe firstly the group strategy that replaced the individual oeuvre with the collective gesture, implying the suitability of alternative lifestyles as opposed to the status quo, and secondly, the organization of a parallel circuit for promoting and circulating production. Intellectuals and sympathizers rallying around *La Bohème* constituted the necessary quorum for the distribution and social validation of its offerings. Thirdly - and no less importantly-, the fact that survival did not depend upon artistic production per se definitively liberated it from the tyranny of patronage. This financial independence marked a substantial difference from the avant-garde movement, whose interest in collective experimentation and socio-political concerns was mediated by the patronage that guaranteed its productions.<sup>1</sup>

Although we owe the typology of collective action as an independent survival strategy to *La Bohème*, the Avant-garde with its insatiable desire for experimentation signified the definitive downfall of solo work (Brea 23), doing away with another of the supporting pillars of the modern artistic canon. The avant-garde collaboration dynamic, sustained by programmatic platforms that encouraged collective experimentation, opened unexpected formal paths, such as, collage, photomontage, performance art and multidisciplinary actions in which the incorporation of the reproducible technical image was fundamental (Flusser 14). The notion of authorship tied to the individual artist<sup>2</sup> remained an essential guideline.

### ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE: THE EUPHORIA OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

The triumphal and euphoric advent of collaboration in the 1960s was a reaction to the discrediting of the notion of progress, which promised an industrial society, mass culture and corporate community. A child of the Cold War and the counterculture of the 1960s, its advent marked a change in episteme, confronting head on the three supporting pillars of the modern canon: the artist as an individual entity, the oeuvre as a unique collectable object and art per se as an insular system.

Direct inheritor of the incursions of Fluxus, CoBrA, Viennese Actionism and new communication strategies, which permeated the new evolving art methods of the era, such as: happenings, performance art and conceptualism; the collaboration of the 1960s-70s found a foothold in a solid social movement that nourished art through new theoretical perspectives. The New Social Movement (NSM), which started in the mid-1960s and The Resource Mobilization Theory of the 1970s were core in that respect, developing fundamental social action tactics like anti-establishment activities, which would later be adopted by art.

We owe the appearance and consolidation of collaboration typologies directly associated with group structure authorship to this moment. Two fundamental typologies could be discerned. The first, associated with duo actions, displaced individual authorship in pursuit of collective identity.<sup>3</sup> This typology was notable for its evolving nature and the historic-anthropological interest of its offerings associated with historic remembrance. Such were the cases of Anne and Patrick Poirier, The Boyle Family, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison or Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clarke. The dematerialization of the figure of the artist as emphatic being was essential. Here of note was the dialoguing entity comprised of Gilbert & George, who carried this situation to a climax through their living sculptures, or the case of Christo and Jeanne-Claude whose artistic personalities merged like a corporate gesture. But without a doubt, the duo integrated by Marina Abramovic and Ulay was the one that carried the dematerialization of the figure of the artist the farthest by incorporating radical strategies like negligence and self-destruction, which procured the death of the author.

The second typology shared in a more extensive group concept. We witnessed stable or relevant group formations associated solely with circumstantial strategies. If in the first groups a self-referential interest tied to artistic circumstances prevailed, here radicalization in pursuit of far-ranging, socio-cultural interests was dominant. Let us recall the incursions of associations, such as, Art & Language New York, Ant Farm, Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury, No!Art, among others.

A & L NY saw fluctuation on the part of its members, who often abandoned the artistic canon for all-out adherence to social causes, such as in the cases of Karl Beveridge and Carol Condé. Ant Farm, for its part, sought massive distribution of its message through new means, specifically video and television as network and the urban icon. The nomadic nature of its interventions caused it to travel throughout the country.

Boundaries between artistic collaboration and social activism became increasingly blurred; both sides penetrated and fed off each other. Collective action became a social strategy in the fight for demands for pressing social, gender, minority or socio-cultural issues as in the cases of Guerrilla Girls or Gran Fury. Collective euphoria became social activism, abandoning the white cube<sup>4</sup> to integrate itself into the urban scene, but not for long.

### 911: A RETURN TO THE CATHARTIC PURITY OF THE GESTURE

After the much-publicized "millennium bug," we inaugurated the ebullient twenty-first century with tear gas explosions and rubber bullets. We witnessed an anti-globalization movement of social action -a reaction to growing neoliberalism- that made itself felt wherever the leadership of transnational power met. The WTO protests, Seattle, 1999 and the Summit of the Americas, Quebec, 2001 were without a doubt its clearest manifestations. Social groups opposed to the neoliberal agenda flourished all over the place; among them, Direct Action Network (Seattle), Hemispheric Social Alliance, (Toronto), Reclaim the streets (London), Tute Bianche (Italia).

It seemed that the desire for mobilization inherited from the collective euphoria had finally taken over the streets. However, the tragic 9/11 attacks put an end to the liberating gesture and strengthened the control of the power structure.

Even though we can speak of a growing number of collaborative works in the new millennium, the nature of these -of necessity- is entirely different. Firstly, of note is the fact that many of the protagonists of the collective euphoria of the 1960s-70s were iconic figures in the 1990s. Some of them were associated with the system of higher learning and that in a way explains the collaborative revival, which was at times reduced to a mere marketing strategy: a kind of expressive medium or rhetorical pose endorsed by the mainstream. Fictional groups then appeared, basing their oeuvre on a simulacrum of the feigned collective pose as irony and marketing strategy, like the well-known case of Bob and Roberta Smith.

An essential duality prevails at the base of contemporary collective personalities. We witness a society that exalts a whole group of illustrious liberating artists who fabricate redemptive mirages, which on a factual level are reduced to the very strict rules of a game. The concept of network and global culture creates the illusory sensation of expanded participation<sup>5</sup> when, in reality, most of the time it detours our anxieties and concerns to a cathartic purge, thereby negating our role as active social entities. One would have to add that the subversive gesture, signature of the collaborative act, has been reduced to an aesthetic pose, nowadays being nothing more than another of the trends sought by collectors, museums and galleries, which dilute any subversive gesture emptying it of all meaning.

There is no doubt that collective action generates a unique, controversial experience that compels us to question and analyze. This is the logic that underlies current collectives everywhere. At times they denounce the state of "banalization" and control as in the works of A Kassen (Copenhagen), Democracia (Madrid) or Escóitar (Vigo). Others incorporate pressing social problems as in the relevant trio integrated by David Ávalos, Elizabeth Sisco and Luis Hock (California), ATSA (Montreal) or Tercerynquinto (Mexico DF). Sometimes they scrutinize the artistic space, as in Dector & Dupuy (Paris), or the interest in the social framework of the Web and artificial intelligence: Finishing School (Los Angeles).

Although the collective euphoria of the second half of the twentieth century incorporated many of the strategies of the era's social movements, it is at the same time indisputable that today's activist actions have assimilated much of the aesthetic arsenal arising from art's participative fervor. This establishes essential links between fields of action allowing for the integration into cultural studies of many of the actions that would have formerly been confined to the social sphere.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold." Clement Greenberg. "Avant-garde and Kitsch." First published in *Partisan Review* Fall, 1939: 34-39.

<sup>2</sup> Except for very few exceptions, such as: Hill and Adamson, Southworth and Hawes, Kukryniksy, and Jean Arp- Sophie Taeuber.

<sup>3</sup> This is what Green defines as *Third Hand*. See Green, Charles. *The third hand: collaboration in art from conceptualism to postmodernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Expanded Edition. The essay appeared for the first time in *Artforum* in 1976.

<sup>5</sup> See the concepts *fantasy of abundance* and *fantasy of participation*, in Dean, Jodi, in her essay, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," in the book edited by Bolter, Megan: *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technologies, 2008. 121-122.

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