Observations on Collective Cultural Action

Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) is a collective of five new genre artists that was formed in 1987. Since that time, the group has produced art work, events, and theory that explores and critiques models of representation used in capitalist political-economy to sustain and promote authoritarian policies. At the same time, the group's research and explorations have been about more than just production and critique. CAE has also had a sustained interest in the variety of organizational possibilities from which artistic practice can emerge. Of particular interest has been the nature and types of collectives that intersect artistic and activist practices, because it is only through an understanding of this particular branch of sociology that the group believes that it can refine and improve its own structure and dynamics that makes quality cultural production possible. In turn, the group hopes that this research in micro-sociology will contribute as much to the continuation of resistant cultural models as our books or art works.

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF MARKET DEMANDS

After reviewing the current status of the U.S. cultural economy, one would have to conclude that market demands discourage collective activity to such a degree that such a strategy is unfeasible. To an extent, this perception has merit. Financial support certainly favors individuals. In art institutions (museums, galleries, art schools, alternative spaces, etc.), the Habermas thesis--that Modernity never died--finds its practical illustration. In spite of all the critical fulminations about the death of originality, the artist and the rest of the entities named on the tombstones in the Modernist cemetery, these notions persist, protected by an entrenched cultural bureaucracy geared to resist rapid change. If anything, a backlash has occurred that has intensified certain modernist notions. Of prime importance in this essay is the beloved notion of the individual artist. 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. This final category may be the most important. Even a community art star must do a project that includes mingling with the "community" and with the

project's sponsor(s). Mingling bodies is as important in the progressive scene as it is in the gallery scene. This demand for bodily commingling is derived from the most traditional notions of the artist hero, as it signifies an opportunity to mix with history and interact with genius.

The totalizing belief that social and aesthetic values 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 in spite of this broad spectrum of possibilities, 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 numerous mechanisms to ensure that this occurs are too many to list here, so only a few illustrative examples will be offered. 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 classrooms, 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 be to the faculty member who goes to the tenure review board with only collective efforts to show for he/rself. Obviously, these reward systems have their effect on the cultural socialization process.

On the public front, the situation is no better. If artists want grants for reasons other than being a nonprofit 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 would CAE be so in favor of collective cultural action?

Part of the answer once again has to do with market demands. Market imperatives are double-edged swords. There are just as many demands that

contradict and are incommensurate with the ones just mentioned. Three examples immediately spring to mind. First, the market wants individuals with lots of skills for maximum exploitation--it's a veritable return to the "renaissance man." 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 (including art history, aesthetics, critical theory, sociology, psychology, world literature, media theory, and history, and given the latest trends, now various sciences), be a capable public speaker, a career administrator, and possess the proper diplomatic skills to navigate through a variety of cultural subpopulations. Certainly some rare individuals do have all of these skills, but the individual members of CAE are not examples of this category. Consequently, we can only meet this standard by working collectively.

Second, there is the need for opportunity. Given the overwhelming number of artists trained in academies, colleges, and universities over the past thirty years, adding to what is already an excessive population of cultural producers (given the few platforms for distribution), the opportunity for a public voice has rapidly decreased. By specializing 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 specialization (and hence pigeonholing). CAE, for example, can be doing a web project one moment, a stage performance at a festival the next, a guerrilla action the next, museum installation after that, followed by a book or journal project. (FIGS. 1-4) Due to collective strength, CAE is prepared for many cultural opportunities.

Finally, 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, CAE members are able to resist the Warhol syndrome of factory production using underpaid laborers. 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 to CAE 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 organization is the catastrophe of the group reaching critical mass. When this point is reached, group activity violently explodes, and little or nothing is left of the organization. The reasons for hitting this social wall vary depending on the function and intention of the group. CAE's experience has been that larger artists/activists groups tend to hit this wall once membership rises into the hundreds. At that point, a number of conflicts and contradictions emerge that cause friction in the group. 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 using a direct process to using 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 rationalized 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 underrepresented and powerless to compete with majoritarian views and methods. (Too often, these minorities reflect the same minoritarian structure found in culture as a whole). Under such conditions, group splintering, if not group annihilation, is bound to occur. Oddly enough, the worst case scenario is not group annihilation, but the formation of a Machiavellian 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 (between fifteen and fifty members). While these smaller groups have an easier time avoiding the alienation that comes from a complex division of labor 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 mid-size group. The probability is high that someone, for emotional or idiosyncratic reasons, is not going to be able to work with

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. To be sure, intimacy produces its own peculiar friction, but the group has a better chance of surviving the arguments and conflicts that are bound to 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.

WORKING A PROJECT

Describing a specific event in collective practice is rather difficult because it is nearly impossible to accurately articulate the many levels of exchange and development that occur as members engage in the production process. However, in the interest of clarity, here is an example (albeit imperfect) of how the group's process works.

Currently, the members are working on a project called "Flesh Machine." CAE thought that this project would be exemplary as it is a symphony of media, and because we are in the middle of producing it, and hence the description will be framed less from hindsight. The content of the projects won't be addressed due to lack of space, but the foundational goals of the project were to examine how human flesh is being invaded, commodified, and marketed, and how traces of eugenic ideology are replicating themselves in the economy of reproductive technologies.

The idea for Flesh Machine began after CAE performed and lectured at a conference of media activists and artists called The Next Five Minutes (N5M) in Amsterdam. Of prime concern at this conference was the Net and other advances in information and communications technology, and how this technology could be used for subversive and contestational political purposes. CAE had spent the previous two years wandering from tech-art festival to tech-art festival, and in an Amsterdam hotel room we concluded (along with fellow festival nomads Mark Dery and Hakim Bey) that the political future for communications and information technology seemed relatively clear, and that N5M had put the period on generative discussion for the near future. However, an unresolved issue seemed to be sneaking about many of these conferences and festivals--biotechnology, and reproductive technology in particular. From that moment on, CAE turned its attention and energies to the technological revolution that wasn't getting the hype. As usual, a new topic seemed to emerge out of an old one.

concept research
image research

Once the subject is decided upon, the first step is always research, and this project was no different. CAE divided into two research teams, with one doing concept research and the other doing image research. Once an appropriate database was assembled, CAE began the Flesh Machine project with the book team writing up the results of the research in a series of essays. The texts were then passed on to the design team to be put into book form. The book, _Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies, and New Eugenic Consciousness_ (Autonomedia) came out in early 1998. From this work members took the ideas that would guide the projects that were to follow, and from the image database we took the images that would be the foundation of the project.

Four key projects arose from this period of research and reflection. First was a children's CD ROM ~~entitled~~ Let's Make a Baby! It was designed for presentation at the Technoscience section of Hybrid Workspace at Documenta. Its theme was to examine new reproductive technologies at a simple yet accurate level in order to present the manner in which the rationalization of reproduction promotes pancapitalist value systems. This work began with a production team who wrote the text and did the drawings for the book (in this case, the team included a guest artist, Faith Wilding). Then the project went to the design team for layout and then to the tech team for coding. CAE prefers to set tasks for teams of two so each member has an immediate consultant for their task. For example, in the case of material production for the CD, one artist wrote the text, the other did the drawings, and each acted as an advisor to the other. At the end of each stage of production, CAE generally takes time to get a collective OK, and to make sure everyone knows what stage a project is at. The collective used to be more formal about these procedures, but after ten years the level of trust has reached a point where there are times where everyone just does their job, and the group does not examine the piece until it is completed.

The other three pieces are still under construction. Furthest along is the "The Fitness Test." This questionnaire examines a person's flesh marketability should they decide to donate eggs or sperm, or volunteer for surrogacy. This project began when a research team obtained some donor screening exams, and immediately noticed how strict the market gene pool was, and how aestheticized the genetic markers were. From there, it went to the tech/design team who began creating a presentation strategy on CD-ROM. An entire faux company (BioCom)** was built around the test that reflects current reproductive hype as well as the hype's ideological subtexts. Those who "do well" on the test will asked to participate in "The Cloning Project." For this section, CAE built a cryo-lab and has begun accepting donations of

cells and embryos, and volunteers for surrogacy and/or cytoplasm donation. To accomplish these tasks, one team was detailed to construct the cryotanks (another guest artist, Colin Piepgras, was brought in for his construction and robotics expertise), while two other teams were assembled to begin field research. The first team's task was to observe and learn collection and storage procedures in genetics and cell biology labs, while the other field research team lived for two weeks with CAE's first donors, and documented the couple's experience as they went through IVF treatment. With all this information in hand, CAE is beginning to assemble the full database for presentation. In addition, the performance team is working up a lecture-performance based on our research, which will be given as a preface to contextualize the entire "Flesh Machine" event.

What this means is that CAE members are constantly working on various aspects of production, and must coordinate numerous team activities and individual tasks. In the early days of CAE, people volunteered for certain teams, and there were disputes about who was going to do what. But now everyone knows what they do best, how fast they can do it, and how they can best support the project. Consequently, administration of production is minimal. For those who find such a model a possible alternative, remember that it takes a long time to work out all the bugs that disrupt harmonious member relationships. Nonalienating efficiency does not happen fast, and processes are never problem-free. In addition, the collective does not live in a vacuum, so exterior disruptions often occur that can freeze the group process. With every successfully completed project, a degree of good fortune is involved.

COALITIONS, NOT COMMUNITIES

While cellular collective structure is very useful in solving problems of production, long-term personal cooperation, 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 fulfill the functions of localized cultural and political organizations. Consequently, there has always been a drive toward finding a social principle that would allow like-minded people or cells to organize into larger groups. Currently, the dominant principle is "community." CAE sees this development as very unfortunate. The idea of community is 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 in the media and in

friendship networks

various organizations. This term refers to all people who are gay within a given territory. Even in a localized context, gay men and women populate all social strata, from the underclass to the elite, so it is very hard to believe that this aggregate functions as a community within such a complex division of labor. 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 is friendship networks, but those too fall short of community in any sociological sense.

CAE is unsure 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 relatively closed social subsystems within society. Indeed there are, but they differ from community in that they are products of rationalized social construction and completely lack social solidarity. In order to bring people together from different subsystems who share a similar concern, hybrid groups have to be intentionally formed. These groups are made up of people who are focusing their attentions on one or two characteristics that they share in common, and that 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 organized temporary localized ones as well. One of the problems CAE had with such alliances was in negotiating service to the coalition while maintaining its collective practice. Coalitions are often black holes that consume as much energy as a person is willing to put into them; hence membership burnout is quite common. CAE was no exception. 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 CAE's affiliation with the Nettime coalition.* Nettime is an alliance of activists, artists, collectives, and

organizations from all over Europe and North America that have come together for reasons of generalized support for hard-left cultural and political causes. It has approximately five hundred members, and has existed in various forms for about four 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 on-line list, various newsgroups, and an archive. In addition, the coalition holds annual conferences (the first two, Metaforum I and II, were in Budapest in 1995 and 1996, and the most recent, Beauty and the East, in Ljubljana in 1997), produces and contributes to the production of projects (the latest contribution being Hybrid Workspace at Documenta X), supports various political actions (the most recent being acting as part of the communications wing for actions at the EU summit in Amsterdam), and produces books out of its archive (the most recent being _Netzkritik_).

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--from flame wars to long and detailed discussions--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 a sufficient trust in and allegiance to other members; the coalition as a whole won't tolerate system abuse (such as spamming, or self-aggrandizing 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 coalition members is its cultural economy. Nettime 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 those who have excessive time, labor 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.

CAE does not want to romanticize this form of social organization too much. Problems certainly occur--quarrels and conflicts break out, enraged members quit the list, and events do not always go as expected. However, Nettime is still the most congenial large-scale collective environment in which CAE has ever worked. The reason is that this coalition began with the romantic principle of accepting nonrational characteristics--it believed that a large collective could exist based on principles of trust, altruism, and pleasure, rather than based on the Hobbesian assumption (so typical of democratic coalitions) of the war of all against all, which in turn leads to a near pathological over-valuation of the organizational principles of accountability and categorical equality. Nettime functions using just one fail-safe which is system-self destruction. It thereby 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 THOUGHTS

Critical Art Ensemble has sustained a collective cultural practice for ten years. The collective began when the members were still students, and to this day none of us have considered solo careers.*** Now, we cannot even imagine what it would be like to have an individual practice, partly because no CAE member has ever had one, and partly because it seems to be a more difficult path to travel. Granted, CAE will never have a blue-chip career, but except for the excessive profits that art stars earn, the group has acquired all the benefits that such a career provides: The practice is self-sufficient; the membership has the means to produce the projects that it wants to make; the group has access to international distribution; and most importantly, CAE has a public platform from which to speak. Such benefits did not come our way entirely because we took advantage of group organization, but it certainly was a contributing cause.

Although collectives are not representative of cultural production in the "art world," cells and coalitions 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 rationalized and instrumentalized culture by re-creating some of the positive points of friendship networks within a productive environment. For this reason, CAE believes that artists' research into alternative forms of social organization is just as important as the traditional research into materials, processes, and products.

Notes

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

** An inauthentic metastructure (BioCom, Inc.) was used to give the collected documents and procedures a thematic relationship; however, all medical documents and procedures used in the project are authentic. The couple documented going through IVF treatment is also authentic; however, they did not engage the procedure for the sake of the project. Rather, they volunteered to participate in the project after they had already decided to undertake IVF treatment. The design of the CD-ROM also mimics the popular design techniques for electronic documents from medical institutions.

***In the first year of its existence, CAE membership changed quite a bit. Only two members remain from the first year. In the second year, the membership stabilized at six. Five of the members are still in the collective; one member left after four years.

CAE is a collective of five artists dedicated to the exploration of the intersections between art, technology, critical theory, and political activism.