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## The Collective Conscious

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Contemporary art is a multibillion-dollar global industry. But why does such a big deal look so small, so slight, with its bland paintings, self-regarding videos, artful tchotchkes and shoppable M.F.A. artists-to-watch? There has to be another way to go, an alternative to a used-up "alternative." By far the most interesting option so far, one that began to be news a few years ago and has increased its visibility since, is the work of miniature subcultures known as collectives. Basically, art collectives do away with the one-artist-one-object model. They come in various sizes and formats: couples, quartets, teams, tribes and amorphous cyberspace communities. Sometimes a group of artists assumes the identity of a single person; sometimes, a single artist assumes the identity of many. Membership may be official, or casual, or even accidental: friends brainstorming in an apartment or strangers collaborating on the Internet from continents away. And they may or may not refer to their activities as art. Research, archiving and creative hacking are just as likely to produce objects, experiences, information that is politically didactic or end-in-itself beautiful, or both. One way or another, joint production among parties of equal standing — we're not talking about master artist and studio assistants here — scrambles existing aesthetic formulas. It may undermine the cult of the artist as media star, dislodge the supremacy of the precious object and unsettle the economic structures that make the art world a mirror image of the inequities of American culture at large. In short, it confuses how we think about art and assign value to it. This can only be good.

Consider, for example, the work of a collective with the name 0100101110101101.ORG. It consists of two young Spanish artists, Eva and Franco Mattes, who call their art "media actionism." Last year, they produced an elaborate international promotional campaign (posters, magazine, trailer, etc.) for a Hollywood-style war film titled "United We Stand," starring [Penélope Cruz](#) and [Ewan McGregor](#).

The images in the poster and trailer, with barely disguised but heroicized references to the current war in Iraq, can be taken as typical examples of Hollywood-style propaganda-as-history. But the layers of deception go deeper. The film itself, echoing President Bush's triumphal "Top Gun" turn, exists only as advertising. It is a fiction built on fantasy. But thanks to an extensive poster campaign, the nonexistent film may lodge in our consciousness all the same.

For an earlier project, the collective created a benign computer virus as a work of art and made it available on a computer disc. For another, it hacked the Nike Corporation's Web site, inserting an "official" announcement of Nike plazas to be built in cities all over the world. If art can be defined as the purposeful shaping of images to embody and expand ideas, this collective's activities easily qualify.

If you want to locate the discrete work of art, however, you have a problem. You can own a piece of the "United We Stand" project by buying (or stealing) a poster, and you might get the virus whether you want it or not. What's really on offer, though, is conceptual substance: ideas about surveillance, ownership and the pervasiveness of the cultural propaganda otherwise known as popular entertainment.

Other collectives, several of which are represented in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, which opened last week, stretch conventional definitions of art and artist even further, into the realm of activist politics, scientific experimentation and historical reclamation.

Critical Art Ensemble, now well known because of the 2004 investigation of one of its members, Steve Kurtz, on suspicion of bioterrorist activities, combines the first two elements. Well aware of 1960's

communalism, and directly influenced by collectives from the AIDS movement — Act Up, Gran Fury, Group Material — Critical Art Ensemble operates as a combination of scientific investigative unit, anticapitalist guerrilla cell, public service agency and multimedia art studio. It has conducted research into government and corporate control of biotechnology and biogenetics, and then presented its findings in publications, exhibitions and public performances that sometimes take the form of laboratory demonstrations. For a German performance with the artist Beatriz da Costa, the collective tested food brought by visitors for genetically modified organisms, whose import [European Union](#) officials claimed had been banned.

A related performance about genetic engineering and organic food was scheduled for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in the summer of 2004. But it was canceled after the police, answering a 911 call that Mr. Kurtz made from his home after his wife had a fatal heart attack, confiscated what they deemed were suspicious bacterial substances.

The substances were materials for one of the collective's art projects, which are always science projects. It would be easy to think that the government officials prosecuting Mr. Kurtz are simply too obtuse to see the "art" in Critical Art Ensemble's work. Yet it is just as likely that they see an art of potentially subversive information and don't like it.

Critical Art Ensemble is one of many art collectives operating on the principle that information is power and that it is most effectively made available through a combination of science and aesthetics. Another such group, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, combines history, environmental science and art to reveal the use, or misuse, of public land in the United States, with particular emphasis on what it sees as the excesses of the defense establishment.

The means that the collective uses are organizationally complex and specialized, beyond what any individual artist could manage. They include environmental research, book publication, exhibitions, an elaborate Web site and guided tours of military sites, chemical-weapon incinerators and abandoned shopping malls.

They are far less interested in producing art objects than in providing an experience of the world through a scientifically based aesthetic language of symmetries and disharmonies, tones and shades, concreteness and abstraction. Like the earth artist Robert Smithson, they locate the poetry of dissolution in geology. Unlike him, they don't physically shape the land itself, but shape the way you think about it. Through their art-as-science, or science-as-art, you make the environment, natural and constructed, your own without owning it.

If this collective model represents an alternative to the object-fixated market economy of art, other models are notable for turning conventional ideas of what an artist is inside out. For the singular artist-as-genius that is the foundation of the entire art industry, including sales exhibitions and criticism, they substitute multiplicity, anonymity, unpredictability.

Otabenga Jones & Associates, for example, is the identity assumed by four young African-American artists based in Houston (Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus, Kenya Evans and Robert A. Pruitt). Ota Benga was a real person, an African pygmy brought to the United States in 1904 and exhibited in a cage at the Bronx Zoo as a kind of living illustration for Darwin's "Origins of Species." Otabenga Jones is an invented character who is both a conceptual artist and a historian with an interest in critically reconstituting the connective tissue between African and African-American cultures.

In a recent solo show in Chelsea, his work revisited the Bronx in the 1970's and 80's, when hip-hop and graffiti, art forms with a communal base, were first becoming widely known. At DiverseWork in Houston in 2005 he and the four artists who sometimes use his name installed the equivalent of a sidewalk flea market selling bootleg DVD's and designer knockoffs.

The installation carries references to other artists: David Hammons, who once sold snowballs on the

street in New York, and Georges Adeagbo from the Republic of Benin, who creates marketlike, altarlike outdoor installations. The piece also suggests that as commercial operations, there is no essential difference between the "art world" and the "real world," the gallery and the flea market, except for a protective divide. Outdoors, you could get arrested for selling bootleg goods; inside the art world's precincts, you're probably safe.

Otabenga Jones is four artists acting as one, with their four voices simultaneously blended and distinctive. The collective called the Atlas Group/Walid Raad, also devoted to recovering a social history, is one artist acting as many, specifically as the nonprofit research foundation called the Atlas Group. The subject in this case is the war-torn history of modern Lebanon, considered through installations of materials ranging from videotapes of prisoners being interrogated and tortured to photographic archives assembled by one Dr. Fakhouri.

But there is no Dr. Fakhouri. And although some of the Atlas Group material is based on real sources, much of it was produced by Mr. Raad, an artist based in Beirut and New York. Once you know what you're seeing, the work, usually presented in installation form, takes on an absurdist comic edge. At the same time it vividly evokes the almost preposterous horror of war itself, which Mr. Raad experiences both first hand and from a distance, and has evoked as semifictional collective memory.

Surely the most complicated of all collectively conceived art personalities in circulation at present is the polymath entity named Reena Spaulings, who is an artist, an art dealer and a character in a novel. The gallery that carries her name on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, is by this point the best known and most conventional aspect of the Spaulings enterprise, though it didn't start out that way.

It was initially a storefront studio for the artist Emily Sundblad, who was in the United States from Sweden and was legally required to have a mailing address for residency. She and her partner, John Kelsey, used the space to create what amounted to an art project in the guise of a gallery, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, playing host to performances as well as exhibitions that lasted, in some cases, only a matter of hours.

Although artists have often become dealers, the Spaulings story flips the order around. It was only after the gallery became commercially viable that Spaulings had a solo show in a Chelsea gallery, a collective effort that incorporated elements from the Lower East Side space. At the same time, an autobiographical novel titled "Reena Spaulings" (Semiotexte, 2004) appeared.

To further confuse matters — and confusion of authorship, gender, media and other categorizing labels that the art market relies on to track product is the point of the Spaulings project — the book is the work of a second collective, Bernadette Corporation, with which Mr. Kelsey is affiliated. In the 1990's it created a fashion line and published a magazine (Made in U.S.A.); last year it established an underground film studio in Berlin. The novel itself was written by dozens of contributors, primarily via the Internet, and in the assembly-line mode once used by Hollywood film studios to produce scripts.

Indeed, like many collectives today, Bernadette Corporation exists largely in cyberspace, demonstrating that artists no longer require a place — a studio, a Chelsea — to make and show work, or a gallery system to promote it. In addition, just as collectivity de-emphasizes the singularity of the artist, digital media eliminate, or transform, the idea of the personal "touch" marketed as creative individuality. (The strenuous call for the revival of painting in the past few years might be seen as, in part, a reaction to the perceived encroachment of digital forms.)

Internet-savvy collectives like this one — and some collectives exist exclusively on the Web — take a holistic view of art as a long-term social process, rather than a short-term formal event. Just as important, they want to get their work out, free, to as wide an audience as possible, and the Internet lets them do so.

Unsurprisingly, both Bernadette Corporation and Reena Spaulings were created by artists well versed in anticapitalist and anticorporate politics. Nor is it surprising that the gallery itself, after its free-form

early days, became a going commercial concern, in the process having its edge blunted through its capitulation to the system it supposedly bucked. The gallery, in fact, has recently received critical reprimands around matters of self-promotion. So where will its founders take their project now?

Finally, it's important to acknowledge that making art collectively is by no means an automatic guarantee of radicalism, as the example of the much-touted Wrong Gallery proves.

A collaboration of three highly visible art world movers — Ali Subotnick, Massimiliano Gioni and the artist Maurizio Cattelan — it's a sort of free-floating curatorial project with no permanent address. For awhile it occupied a niche behind a locked glass door on a Chelsea street where it gave short-run shows to chic young artists. In conjunction with the biennial, it has organized a group show at the Whitney.

The Wrong Gallery's Whitney show is on a bad-boyish theme that [Andy Warhol](#) more or less finessed with his "Most Wanted Men" paintings 40 years ago. And this collective itself feels like tired old news. It's strictly an insider operation, limited to mildly tweaking the conventions and protocols of the art world while supporting business-as-usual. No wonder the industry thinks it's just the cleverest thing and gives it full approval. Like the art world in its present form, the Wrong Gallery is prominent and powerful, and trifling.