

On Trying to be Collective

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Introduction

In this talk we ask in what way can the notion of care, collectivising and the collective become a primary part of contemporary art practice. We attempt to reinvigorate the idea of the collective, overriding the way in which societies, based on collective organisation, have been vilified by 20th century Liberalism. To do this we utilise Gerald Raunig's concept of 'Con-dividuality' (Raunig 2010) and Ross' idea of 'Composition' as articulated by the Mauvaise Troupe (Ross 2018). Raunig and Ross set out hopeful new arrangements for working together, demonstrating that there is potential in the collective as a means for democratic living.

We introduce the idea of 'care' as a positive model of collective action. We argue, in line with Nancy Fraser (2016), Hi'ilei Julia Hobart and Tamara Kneese (2020), and Deva Woodley (2020), that care is central to creating a more equal and just society. We explore the notion of the art collective, using the writing of Dave Beech, Mark Hutchinson and John Timberlake (2006), who argue for collectivism over collaboration as a way towards societal change. Trying to avoid an art historical definition of the art collective, we analyse characteristics of five art groups. We review SUPERFLEX's model of pragmatic solutions; The Guerrilla Girls' collective campaigning for representation of women and people of colour in cultural institutions; Group Material's address to contemporary political and social issues through exhibition making and publishing; and Art & Language, whose practice was preoccupied with the 'group's search for an autonomous legitimacy, a legitimacy that is not to be conferred from without' (Gilbert 2007: 78). Finally, we reflect upon our practice as the Free Art Collective and more recently as the Partisan Social Club to try to understand in what ways we utilise collectivity and care in our art practice.

On being collective and collective action

A collective is typically described as aiming to share political and social power, by flattening the decision-making process towards establishing a more egalitarian community. John Curl states in his 2009 book, *For all the people*,

A collective is a small work group of equals, based on direct democracy. The term collective sometimes indicates that the work is done by and for the group as a whole, and not necessarily divided up at all (Curl 2009: 8).

It might have been the chilling accounts of an early 20th century Communist society turned totalitarian rule that led some left leaning supporters to hightail back to the idea of individualism within the project of Liberal Democracy. Lenin's co-operative plan for implementing the socialist transformation of agriculture in the USSR was conceived as a deliberately gradual process, which considered the poverty of the peasant class. Regrettably, for these Russian agricultural labourers, Lenin died before the process was complete. In Stalin's hands speed was king. His forced collectivism proved disastrous and led to millions of peasants dying of starvation (Woods:2005).

This history of co-operative agriculture under Russian Communism may have been a factor in the 20th century hostility towards the idea of collectivity, but this was not the only reason models of social and collective working were undermined. The omission of collective and cooperative social movements from mainstream history was very useful for promoting the ideals of post war liberal democracy, which sought to maintain the idea of individualism. Curl describes how important cooperatives and types of communalism have been to the history of agricultural organisation in America; there are more members of cooperatives today than ever before. He asserts that these forms of collectivity have been underplayed in the construction of American identity. He says,

Cooperatives are almost universally absent from history classes and almost never appear in the American media. An unbalanced emphasis has been placed on the self-reliant, individualistic frontiersman as typical of the Westward movement of American history, while this has only been one element in a much more complex situation (Curl 2009: 7).

Liberal democracy – or in its more realised form, Liberalism – takes freedom, consent, and autonomy as foundational moral values. However, it is Liberalism's contradictory agenda that leads to its undoing. The proponents of Liberalism claim it is committed to an egalitarian democracy, but at the same time they want to place faith in the market as

a space of individual freedom. Critics from the left condemn Liberalism's blind spot – the assumption that social egalitarianism can be achieved from an unequal starting position. Couple this with total trust in the market and it is inevitable that the rich and wealthy become more politically powerful than ordinary working people (Beauchamp: 2019). Pankaj Mishra, when speaking about the failure of the Liberal project, says,

Liberal capitalism was supposed to foster a universal middle class and encourage bourgeois values of sobriety and prudence and democratic virtues of accountability. It achieved the opposite: the creation of a precariat with no clear long-term prospects, dangerously vulnerable to demagogues promising them the moon. Uncontrolled liberalism, in other words, prepares the grounds for its own demise (Mishra: 2018).

And unsurprisingly, Neoliberalism takes the Liberal project further putting the market at the centre of social life by not only privatising previously owned state services and industries but also establishing new areas of marketisation and aiming for a 24-hour economy. David Harvey, says; “[Neoliberalism sees the market as] an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs” (Harvey 2005: 3) And blogger, Paul Treanor describes how the new ethic is applied, he says,

A general characteristic of neoliberalism is the desire to intensify and expand the market, by increasing the number, frequency, repeatability, and formalisation of transactions. The ultimate (unreachable) goal of neoliberalism is a universe where every action of every being is a market transaction, conducted in competition with every other being and influencing every other transaction. (Treanor 2005: n.p)

The maligning by the political right of ‘the collective’ is not new; the utilising of hegemonic terms such as ‘human nature’ has allowed liberal capitalists and the aristocracy before them, to set up a force paradigm, a liberal ideology – one that infers that we are ‘naturally’ individual. There have been various abuses of the cooperative and a denigrating attitude toward the commune and the kibbutz. According

to the right, collective acting is a process of being that denies each person's voice and ends up with a nasty leader.

In his 2010 essay, 'Inventing Con-dividuality: an Escape Route from the Pitfalls of Community and Collectivity', art theorist, Raunig, asks, 'which terminology is suitable for the specific form of concatenation that insists on separation and sharing without presenting the sad figure of sacrifice?' Here, Raunig describes the problems with the etymology of 'community', in this case connecting it to 'totalitarian communities like the 'Volksgemeinschaft'', (people's community as defined by Nazism) and acknowledging 'the problematic dichotomy of individual and community' (Raunig, 2010: 37). He says,

On the one hand, they adhere to uncritical, identitarian, sometimes even totalitarian forms of composition, while on the other, they remain bound to modes of reduction, subtraction and contribution (Raunig, 2010: 37).

Raunig takes us through the etymology of the words 'dividual' – including its use in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) – and 'condivisione,' which he learns from translating Italian philosopher, Paolo Virno's work. In Italian 'condivisione' stands for shared use and relationship, yet it is the make-up of the word that is of interest to Raunig – he says, 'the 'con' indicates the composition, the concatenation, the sharing, whereas 'divisione' indicates the fundamental separation and division of singularities' (Raunig 2010: 45). He goes on to explain further, 'in condivisione the dividual component (the division) does not indicate a tribute, a reduction or a sacrifice, but rather the possibility of an addition, an AND.' (Raunig, 2010: 37). He concludes the essay by providing us with a revised understanding of the arrangement of community. He says,

'It is not necessary for a community to emerge first in order to achieve the recomposition of previously separated individuals; instead the concatenation and the singularities are co-emergent as the condividuality of condividuals' (Raunig, 2010: 37).

The definition of the collective as a formation is not as simple as declaring a group of people turned one. For example, the many individuals who have spent time defending the land of the Zad in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France, come from, different societal-economic backgrounds, span three generations, and bring different skills to the defence of this agricultural land (Mauvaise Troupe Collective and Ross: 2018). The Mauvaise Troupe (the authorial collective of the Zad), describe their arrangement of the collective as both different and together. They name this coming together as composition. Expanding on their description, Kirstin Ross says,

“Composition” could be said to be the way that autonomous forces unite and associate with each other, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes contradicting each other, but always, in the end, dependent on each other (Ross 2018: 331).

On collective care and democracy

Care is both a collective and an individual concern in that it is something that affects us all whether we are driven to perform individual acts of care, or we vote for a collective strategy of state provided care. However, we could say that care is motivated by mutual concerns and is therefore predominantly a collective process. Care does not have a leader nor a single author, but relies on interdependence and accountability. Care is action and method in that it is something we can provide for others but it is also a political tool for thinking about the future of society. For the left who are committed to the central idea of democracy, a communal approach to care is fundamental to achieving an equal and fair society (Tronto 2013). Joan Tronto explains how care is not given the importance of other political issues such as the economy. She says,

The future is not only about economic production but also about caring for the values of freedom, equality and justice. That future is not only about oneself and one’s family and friends but also about those with whom one disagrees, as well, as the natural world and one’s place in it (Tronto, 2013: xii).

In her 2016 essay, ‘Contradictions of Capital and Care’, Nancy Fraser defines the contemporary crisis of care as an ‘expression of the social-reproductive contradictions

of financialized capitalism' (2016: 99). Fraser explains how the capitalist economy utilises the benefits of care for free. She says,

The capitalist economy relies on—one might say, free rides on—activities of provisioning, care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free (Fraser 2016: 101).

Like Tronto, Fraser claims that capitalism does not acknowledge the importance of care to society; capitalism utilises it to keep the social relations of capital intact. Furthermore, capital institutes a system of both financializing and eradicating care from the Global North. Increased paid work per house-hold means that care chores are transferred to others.

Typically, it is racialized, often rural women from poor regions who take on the reproductive and caring labour previously performed by more privileged women. But to do this, the migrants must transfer their own familial and community responsibilities to other, still poorer caregivers, who must in turn do the same—and on and on, in ever longer 'global care chains'. Far from filling the care gap, the net effect is to displace it—from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South (Fraser 2016: 114).

Audre Lorde famously articulated 'self-care' as a vital tool, as a black queer feminist, she spoke of self-preservation as a way to protect herself and continue her political work (Lorde: 1988). Hobart and Kneese in their article entitled 'Radical Care. Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times' (2020) explain the history of care as a radical tool, they set out,

Principles of collective care through self-care applied to antiracist and feminist political movements. During the women's movement and civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, physical health became central to maintaining community resiliency against racism, sexism, colonialism, classism, and homophobia (Hobart & Kneese 2020: 6).

Deva Woodly, in her recent talk at the New School, New York speaks about care as a fundamental tenet in the Black Lives Movement. Here it is understood within the frame of politics rather than ethics. She says,

Within the Blacks Lives Movement, care is seen as an essential activity of governance; the basic need for, and the responsibility to provide care is always needed for human life. And therefore, care must be attended to in the arrangement and maintenance of society and politics (Woodley: 2020).

By positioning care as a central arrangement within democracy these scholars demonstrate that interdependency is a material fact; we need each other to thrive. They describe the politics of care as 'structural', insisting that it is a fundamental public good. Moreover, care is a tool, an approach which they believe will help us arrive closer to an equal society. Woodly says,

'this (discussion on care) is different from recent debates about mindfulness and work life balance; it doesn't put the responsibility on the individual to heal themselves from social ills, but believes that social ills have to be healed through social action (Woodley: 2020).

The debates around the importance of care both in feminist thinking and more recently demonstrated as central to the Black Lives Movement can be seen as a way to construct social and political alternatives. Thinking through care and its inherent relationship to the commons (Barbagallo, Beuret and Harvie: 2019) provides new methods and tools for discussions surrounding alternatives to capitalism.

On art collectives

Beech, Hutchinson and Timberlake, in their short book entitled, 'The rules of engagement', explain what they see as the difference between collaboration and collectivity. They argue that collectivity is a special form of collaboration one that utilises collaborative processes to transcend the limitation of its constituent parts. Collaborations in art are dominated by duos and partnerships, and tend to use the artist names. The two protagonists can preserve hierarchies and authorities at times; i.e the author with the most authority in the collaboration can be regarded as the author of the joint work. They believe that art collaborations preserve the individuals involved but, 'collectivity

produces a transcendent subjectivity - the collective becomes a subject in its own right.' (Beech, Hutchinson and Timberlake 2006: 32).

Collectivising within art is a challenge to perceived individual authorship and acknowledges the social organisation of art. Beech et al, explain, 'Collective art practice is always a strategic way to impugn the actualism of authorial discourses in art'. Collectivism brings attention to the accepted norm of the individual author but more than that it recognises the 'the supportive, contextual, institutional and discursive work done by others to frame and consolidate the individual's contribution' (Beech, Hutchinson and Timberlake 2006: 33).

The idea of the collective within agricultural organisation refers to collective ownership, where shared resources of labour and property are combined to produce a sustainable life (Mearns: 1996). This is distinctly different from the commons, which can be explained as cultural and natural resources available to all members of society, and latterly has incorporated digital and knowledge. There is a collective need to actively protect and manage these resources for the good of all. Care for the commons has become a way to think about alternative ways of living (Ostrom: 1990) and therefore is closely related to ideas of collectivising.

Marxist thinkers, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, montage and complexify the relationship between collaboration, cooperation and the commons, drawing out the ways in which these terms are both slippery - in the lack of discreet definition - but at the same time identifying the potential agency. The commons can be utilised as a way to counter the reliance on wage labour and our subordination to capitalist relations.

We share bodies with two eyes, ten fingers, ten toes; we share life on this earth; we share capitalist regimes of production and exploitation; we share common dreams of a better future. Our communication, collaboration, and cooperation, furthermore, not only are based on the common that exists but also in turn produce the common. We make the common we share every day. (Hardt and Negri 2005: 128)

Art collectives are pretty rare but not unheard of and they are always up to something together. In some cases, they use the collective as a quasi-organisation; SUPERFLEX

for example is made up of members with a range of skills including engineering and design. Their website claims that, 'SUPERFLEX challenge the role of the artist in contemporary society and explore the nature of globalisation and systems of power.' (SUPERFLEX official website n.d.) Their approach to making art is always through a systematic approach to the problems of power and art; for example, their project *Free Sol Lewitt*, for the Van Abbemuseum, in 2010 saw them set up a metal workshop to produce copies of a work by Sol Lewitt, *Untitled (Wall Structure)*, 1972. Replicas of the artwork were made and then 'set free', given away to the museum's public, free of charge. This sharing of cultural artefacts becomes a type of intellectual property commoning (Von Gunten: 2015) which not only extends Sol Lewitt's ideas of reproduction - he specified artworks and others produced them - but emphasises the shared ownership of objects held in museum collections.

SUPERFLEX member, Christiane Berndes, says, 'If the museum's role is to collect and preserve artworks then maybe the next step is for it to distribute artworks, to open up new levels of use, access and ownership' (Berndes 2010: n.pag). Their approach offers 'propositions' to ingrained problems rather than overturning the condition of the problem. Their projects have consistently utilised design and engineering processes to produce responses to social problems typically developing new systems over single products. For example, the Supergas project in which they developed a biogas energy production system developed with European and African engineers. 'Supergas is a simple biogas unit that can produce sufficient gas for the cooking and lighting needs of a typical family living in rural areas of the Global South.' (SUPERFLEX 2014: 335). The 'care' in their work is demonstrated by the way in which they produce tools to engage critically with systems of 'social and cultural production and distribution, with financial and political institutions, with the law, with renewable energy and with urban space.' (Charpenal and McClean 2014: 16)

The Guerrilla Girls self-identify as feminist activist artists. They wear full-face guerrilla masks to maintain their anonymity stating that 'they could be anyone and we are everywhere' (Guerrilla Girls Official Website: n.d., n.pag). Their model of collectivity is similar to a group campaigning for social change; their collaborative artworks address the lack of black, indigenous people and women represented in official museums and large-scale institutions of culture. Davis says, 'Some [collectives] (Guerrilla Girls, Gran

Fury) are an activist outfit, inspired by a real need for anonymity and a commitment to subordinate individual aesthetics to a cause' (Davis: 2010, 19).

The Guerrilla Girls expose the hierarchical power structures behind the museum's operations; revealing how they are predominately governed by white male elites seeking to replicate their own cultural values. Their text works and posters declare that these institutions imitate the dominant power structures of society; and that actual cultural practices of the everyday are overlooked and in their place consensual products, those that do not disrupt liberal values, are collected and displayed. For example, in their 1989 poster work entitled 'Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?' they state that 'Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections (of the Metropolitan Museum, New York) are women but 85% of the nudes are female.' This text, famously rejected by the Public Art Fund, became a series of posters utilising the advertising space on New York buses. The Guerrilla Girls care about the way in which our common culture is narrated and they act to change this dominant practice for those that are underrepresented.

Chris Gilbert in his essay, 'Art & Language and the Institutional Form in Anglo-American Collectivism', describes the post-war context in which new forms of state intervention were implemented in order to create a more organised and bureaucratic approach to the construction of society. He ascribes this shift as having an impact upon artist collectives that previously had been loose associations. He says,

In the pre-war period, artists' organizations had most often been loose associations geared for the support of avant-garde artistic practices (think of the impressionists, futurists, constructivists), which was a reasonable stance given the relatively open modes of agency in the society (Gilbert: 2007: 78).

Gilbert argues the fact that artist collectives organised on their own terms was, 'itself embodied resistance, since in doing so they presumed to dictate the terms of their own sociality (Gilbert 2007: 78)'. A number of groups and collectives were formed in the 1950s (Fluxus) and the 1960s (Art Workers Coalition, Art and Language). In the 1970s 'conceptualist duos and trios became widespread Gilbert and George, the Harrisons, and the Boyle Family' (Gilbert 2007: 78). However, these couplings were more collaborative in nature and relied on an association with an individual rather than a

collective identity. Art and Language were formed in 1967 and by 1976 had expanded to include 30 people (Gilbert 2007: 78). The particular focus of Art and Language was 'to resist and repurpose the functionalism of post-war culture, institutionalizing themselves in an attempt to dictate the terms of their own sociality' (Gilbert 2007: 79). Art and Language interests were on both 'alternative means of education and alternative means of dissemination', thus they established the Art Theory course at Coventry College of Art and the Art-Language journal, later called The Fox. Gilbert says,

The group's key purpose, however "solipsistic," was to assert its own institutional character as an on-going resistance to a larger sociality within which it would otherwise be, and was to a large extent, inscribed' (Gilbert 2007: 79).

Art and Language's reputation for internal arguments and their desire for a continued reform is considered as part of the groups enacting of what they thought should be happening in the larger culture. Gilbert asserts that Art and Language were not appropriating ideas of the institution but rather enacting 'collectivity, taking on an institutional character in an effort to secure autonomy from administered culture' (Gilbert 2007: 89). And furthermore, their work, 'did in fact mark a massive change in art production, after which it became impossible for even mainstream artists to unreflectively adopt the givens of studio practice' (Gilbert 2007: 89).

Group Material were formed in New York in 1979. They were initially a group of ten artists associated through friendships and art school study. Five of them had studied with Joseph Kosuth (an Art & Language member in the early 1970s) who emphasised the importance of collaboration (Ault 2010: 7). The decision to call themselves Group Material declares their choice to work as a group and indicates their alignment with the Marxist theory of cultural materialism, which may have led to them foreground the action of doing and making in the public sphere. Mark Hutchinson, in his review of Julie Ault's book on the collective, 'Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material', suggests that 'they shared a desire for a social practice without knowing what such a practice might be at that particular post-conceptual artistic conjuncture' (Hutchinson 2010: 108). Group Material used practice and doing to find out 'what the group could be and do: to force the issues' (Hutchinson 2010: 109). In July 1980, Group Material opened a gallery in a shop at 244 East 13th Street situated in a working-class area of New York

(Ault 2010: 11). Working within this local context was an important part of their agenda, 'locating themselves here also stood for a symbol of commitment to a different and wider idea of the public sphere than was usual at that time in art' (Hutchinson 2010: 110). Their mission was not to become gallerists but rather to be active artists, that through the production of exhibitions and consequent publishing, (which were located outside of the typical artworld venues) were able to work out a social approach to art. Tim Rollins called their exhibitions, 'Exhibitions as inquiries' (Rollins 2010: 218). Group Material wanted to:

'discuss and present socially engaged art, other people's as well as their own, and to bring together their aesthetic and sociopolitical aims. DIY Culture, feminist discourse, the civil rights movement, Marxist theory, as well as the loose network of collectives, alternative spaces' (Ault 2010: 7).

Group Material's exhibitions included an array of everyday objects displayed alongside various types of artworks; these 'mash-ups' led to the questioning of cultural value as a fundamental part of their work. Their display techniques included the use of informational text, computers, video, and bold colour so denying the 'white cube' spaces of the commercial gallery, instead calling forth a new viewer, one that was expected to read the content and actively engage with the installation. This is particularly evident in their work for the 1991 Whitney Biennale entitled 'Aids Timeline', The Whitney Museum of American Art New York (Ault 2010: 182). Other techniques for the production of artworks are evident in 'Collaboration', The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, 1991, where 'the group produces a video of interviews with area residents on the subjects that divide and unite the college of Oberlin, Ohio' (Ault 2010: 179). The edited video is displayed in the museum and papier-maché rocks, reproductions of those on the campus, are sited in the grounds (Ault 2010: 179). Rollins describes Group Material's relationship to care as one of making work 'in concert with communities in crisis with a direct intention to change things to a positive effect' (Rollins 2010: 217).

On trying to be collective

In 2018, when the Free art collective (FAC) came to an end, we (Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan) wanted to continue with a collective art practice, so we devised the Partisan Social Club (PSC), intending it to be a contingent collective with people

coming and going dependent on their availability. The materials of our work as PSC, as in the FAC, includes politics, collectively and action, developed in the context of the histories, theories and practices of art.

The FAC wrote manifestos to be shared and read out together, at what we called spoken choirs. The manifestos were always a re-write from an existing manifesto text. For example; 'The Freee Art Collective for a Counter Hegemonic Art', (Freee Art Collective: 2005) took the Engels and Marx's 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' and rewrote parts of it to propose a counter hegemonic art; 'The Manifesto for a New Public', (Freee Art Collective: 2012) was based on Vladimir Tatlin's text 'The Initiative individual in the Creativity of the Collective' (1919) and 'The UNOVIS program for the Academy of Vitebsk', (1920). We left some parts of these texts intact; as well as changed words and added sentences to make our own new meanings. We wanted to keep the original ideas not far from the surface to demonstrate shared authorship in the production of ideas. We would ask volunteers to read the manifesto and underline the things that they agreed with ready for them to then read aloud at a spoken choir. We would meet up, usually in a gallery space and read the text out loud together. As members of Freee, we would read all of the manifesto as we had already made our changes from the original, but there were some sections of the text that were not read by others. When the room was full of voices we could hear the most assented parts of the text loudly. And when fewer people joined in we understood these parts of the manifesto to be less popular. The choirs were not conventional performances as we asked that if you attended the choir you should participate in it. You could not be a conventional onlooker, you had to be a member of the choir to be present at the event.

Whilst FAC was made of three members; Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan, the Partisan Social Club (PSC) operates as a changing collective with members coming and going. The contributors to PSC's art projects become members of the collective; and we utilise a type of 'tag', or 'passing on' method so new members can generate the next event. In PSC's 2018 project, *On being together; memberships, collectives and unions*, at Beaconsfield Art Gallery, Vauxhall, London (BGV), the process of working together became both the content of the project and method of producing it. We made an open call for members, and in total we had 28 people respond and join in with the project. By proclaiming membership over participation, we wanted to initiate a way in

which to *learn together* as a group. We sought to constitute the project differently from typical participatory art projects, which call forth participants to engage in scheduled activity that usually leads to a predetermined outcome. We attempted to produce the project differently by instigating open-ended ‘workshopping’, sharing content as a way in which to start our collective work. We are inspired by what Harney and Morton describe as ‘study’ and ‘being together’ as a process of learning, they state that this usually happens beyond the university and in informal spaces (Harney & Morton 2013: 105). We facilitated three days of presentations and practice workshops, PSC member Chris Daubney states that,

‘These opening presentations helped to frame activities among team members through which to explore further the intersection of art and politics. Ideas around political forms of ‘membership’ and collective opinion formation, especially within differing social and cultural contexts, were jointly-defined and debated’ (Daubney 2018: n.pag).

We produced temporary experimental structures and slogans within the inside and outside spaces at BGV. Of more significance for collectivising production were the iterations of workshops and events that members developed and hosted throughout the last four weeks of the project. These included: Slogan Writing with The Partisan Social Club @ Half Term, Sadie Edington, Allan Struthers and Simon Tyszko; Subverting the Pop Song: Hijacking Popular Music for Opinion Formation, Tim Cape and Toby Tobias; The Partisan Social Club Entertains, Richard Galpin on ‘The Charterists and growing Lettuce in Lambeth’; and Partisan Bingo by Liz Murray, Simon Tyszko and Alison Gill. This type of turn-taking method or ‘tag’ attempts to disrupt ideas of authorship and leadership, as well as allow the content addressed by the PSC to continually change.

We liked the idea of being partisan, as it describes a clear commitment to a political movement or set of political ideas, so we called ourselves the Partisan Social Club. We referred to scholars Jonathan White and Leah Ypi for their perspective of partisanship. They believe that the role of partisanship could be a method to improve existing versions of democracy. ‘Partisanship is typically associated with negotiating and bargaining from a self-interested perspective recognised as best a concession to

political realism' (White & Ypi 2016: 8). However, partisanship unlike factionalism involves efforts to harness political power not for the benefit of one social group among many but for that of the association as a whole. "Partisanship is a practice that involves citizens acting to promote certain shared normative commitments according to a distinctive interpretation of the public good. Their goals are to make their concerns heard in the public sphere so that they may be brought to bear on the course of collective decision-making (White & Ypi 2016: 8).

The slogans we generated as the Free Art Collective (FAC), were partisan, in the spirit of opinion formation in the public sphere. We published our opinions as slogans using props and included our bodies in the artworks, aiming to encourage others to declare what they believed in. Although this process presents our views before we can hear from others, we imagine it as a method of publishing which does more than ask questions of the reader. Posing questions to others is a particular type of speech act, in that 'there is more than one kind of meaning conveyed by a speech act and verbal forms alone are not sufficient as a basis for determining meaning'. Therefore 'the meaning of questions must be partly dependent on rules governing social relationships' (Athanasiadou: 1991, 109). A question requires previous knowledge of the subject, a relationship with the asker, it can be rhetorical in that the asker already has a fair idea of the answer, a question can also allow *the asker* to find out if *the asked* knows the answer, or simply it can be an indirect question where no answer is actually required (Athanasiadou: 1991). The slogan is a speech act that galvanises the user (and the viewer or hearer) of the motto into action with the intention for change. The slogan is also collective; it needs collaborators to agree with it and then reuse it, say it, embody it and pass it on for it to be effective (Jordan: 2019). Mieszkowski says 'Slogans blur the very distinction between knowledge and action and are regarded an integral to the dynamic of necessity and freedom that is to drive radical praxis' (Mieszkowski: 2016: 149).

In her 2017 essay, 'Three keys to Understanding the Free-Carracci-Institute as the Commons' Emma Mahony describes the way in which the FAC's slogans reappear in multiple formats 'as a billboard poster, a banner, a placard, etched into the side of a brazier, or spelling out of a message in a firework display.' Mahony concludes that a refusal of a fixed form, 'aligns with Hardt and Negri's understanding of constituent

power, insofar as it reconfigures it's form in response to the shifting requirements of its users' (Mahony 2017:70).

In the PSC project at the Coventry Biennial in 2019 called, *After Thompson: The Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness*, we used the political content of Thompson's work to declare our position on ideas of structural care. The project involved working with existing PSC members and calling forth new members to explore ideas of labour, economy and the distribution of wealth as first expressed in the writing of Irish philosopher William Thompson (1755 – 1833). Thompson's 1824 text, 'An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness' (Thompson: 2005) was his first major work in political economy, and it contains his most comprehensive critique of capitalism as well as his proposal for a co-operative society as an alternative to the existing state of affairs, which saw acute poverty amongst the lower classes in Ireland and the UK at that time. His study attempted to combine a scientific and ethical critique of the system, concentrating on how wealth is created and also how it is distributed. To this end, he introduced the term 'social science' to the English language, as a name for his approach.

Marx read and was influenced by Thompson. Common to them both is the use of the labour theory of value and of exploitation in understanding the creation of surplus value, wealth and consequently inequality and mass unhappiness. Thompson popularised the word 'competitive' as a description of capitalism and also the word 'socialism' in debates in London with Robert Owen and the political economist John Stuart Mill.

For the project at Coventry Biennial we hosted an initial workshop in which members discussed and translated Thompson's ideas into statements, texts and artworks, corresponding to their own experiences and viewpoints on working life, equality and happiness. Photographic documentation of this session was pasted on the walls in the PSC project space at Coventry Biennial as a room-sized billboard poster, responses to Thompson wrapped the whole room. We produced a 'Workshopping Study Manual' as an introduction to Thompson's ideas. It introduced the reader to Thompson's key questions;

‘How comes it that a nation abounding more than any other in the rude materials of wealth, in machinery, dwellings and food, in intelligent and industrious producers, with all the apparent means of happiness, with all the outward semblences of happiness exhibited by a small and rich portion of community; should still pine in privation?’ (Thompson 2005: xxviii).

Through the duration of the exhibition, various public workshops were led by PSC members. The workshops enabled the collaborative production of sound works, T-shirts, posters, and performances. Slogans, motivated by Thompson’s work, were painted onto the ceiling tiles of the PSC project space.

On care, collectivising and the art collective

We set out to ask how the notion of care, commoning and the collective can become a primary part of contemporary art practice, and what this type of practice might be like?

We are bound to this enquiry as we have been practising as an art collective since 2004; firstly, as the Free art collective, and latterly as the Partisan Social Club. We have two reasons for deciding to work in this way: 1. Collective working acknowledges our connection with the historical avant-garde – it is a way to challenge the ontological limits of individualism and the social limits of art. At the beginning of this essay we evidence the way in which the collective and the co-operative have been both maligned and under historicised. We look to Raunig (2010), the Zad and Ross (2018) to give us new hope for both the construction of community and the workings of a collective. 2. Employing the method of care via action in a collective art practice enables us to foreground collective encounters, social events and the exchange of opinions, over finished artefacts. In our case the content of our recent projects *On Being together* and *After Thompson* address working collectively and care. After Tronto (2013) we understand care as a politics of democracy not as an individual responsibility; care as a way to look out for each other, so that as few people as possible suffer from poverty, racism or prejudice. Woodley’s (2020) articulation of the way in which the Black Lives Movement utilises a political idea of care, demonstrates there are possibilities for it as a means to political change. Hardt and Negri (2005) enable us to consider the commons as a practice of sharing and a tool for freeing us of private property.

Commoning, in conjunction with care and collectivising can be utilised as a political force towards social change.

Art practice is always contingent and relies on a number of experiments, encounters and occurrences as part of the process of producing artworks. Art sits between autonomy and the social fact, 'the polarity and autonomy and social character marks the position of artworks within advanced capitalist societies' (Zuidervaart 1990: 65). And artworks do not just appear in the world, they are part of a social system of production and display that include, art schools, studios, galleries, museums, dealers and collectors that bring artworks to the public.

We have demonstrated that art collectives, like other artists, are different from each other; being collective is not a formal process but rather a conceptual value. We cannot generalise on what constitutes a collective art practice; but we can reflect upon art practices that choose to utilise care, commoning and collectivising as a central method for their cultural production.

We are aware that care, commoning and collectivising do not offset the problems of what Gregory Sholette (2013) has called the 'dark matter' of the art world where the actions of artists that are not recognised by critics, gallerists and collectors, are commodified and used to sustain the survival of the mainstream artworld. Or the rise of what, Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) have called 'artistic capitalism'. They propose that the industrial and cultural spheres should no longer be considered in a dichotomous way but rather understood in an interdependent way thereby advancing the 'aestheticization of the economy'. And artists perform very well in, what Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) in their book the *New Spirit of Capitalism*, call the 'projective city'. Here people's successes are marked by the lack of permanent jobs and the rise of zero-hour contracts – this precarious approach to work is already practised very well by the artistic community.

An art collective is *internally* social in the way that it arrives at its outcomes. It may be criticised for reproducing the team mentality of industrial capitalism, and promoting a precarious work ethic. But nevertheless, the aim of existing collectively

is not to produce surplus value, but to value the extra sociality it can achieve through being together.

We argue that processes of care, commoning and collectivising in art practice are not simply a critique of society. It is because these attributes are based in action rather than representation that they offer a socially productive approach to artistic practice in the age of advanced capital.

The communal energy that comes from working side by side on a physical task, writing slogans together, or making placards for a march creates respect, empathy and solidarity between the members. Kristin Ross when discussing the composition of political movements says,

That eclecticism and the disagreements it produces can be exhausting, often aggravating. So why make the effort? Because the power of the movement resides in a certain excess—the excess of creating something that is more than the sum of ourselves—something that only the composition between our differences makes possible (Ross, 332: 2018).

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Artist Details

Andrew Hewitt and Mel Jordan are former members of the Free art collective. In 2017, they formed The Partisan Social Club, a provisional group including artists, designers and researchers all working with ideas about the relationship of art and collective politics. Hewitt and Jordan's work has fore-fronted the application of public sphere theory to the practice of participatory art in order to investigate the relationship between art and its publics. Their work has been exhibited at the Istanbul Biennial and the Liverpool Biennial as well as BAK, Utrecht, Wysing Arts, Cambridge, Milton Keynes Gallery, SMART Project Space, Amsterdam, the ICA London, Centro Cultural, Montehermoso, Vitoria, Spain, the Collective Gallery Edinburgh, International Project Space, Birmingham and 1000000mph Gallery, London. Recent Partisan Social Club projects include: *On being together: memberships, collectives and unions*, 2018, Beaconsfield Art Gallery, London. *Social Montage: Speak-Act-Print-Publish!* Project and exhibition at Edinburgh Printmakers, 2019. *'The Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness'*, Coventry Biennial, 2019.

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