

Not Going It Alone:

A Conversation

Gerrie van Noord / Paul O'Neill

Gerrie van Noord: Looking at developments over time, there is quite a discourse on artistic collectives and group practices but much less around curatorial practices in which collaboration and/or collective working is a central characteristic. One of the issues is maybe how to acknowledge who collaborates with whom, for what reasons, and how we name or label things. Before discussing these aspects, maybe we could simply start with how this book came about.

Paul O'Neill: apexart approached me for a text for a publication on collaborative curating, for which I reworked an existing essay, first published in *Art Monthly* in the early 2000s, and extended about a decade later. apexart has increasingly worked with curatorial collectives, groups of artists and curators, or groups of curators working

together to formulate an exhibition proposal. The impetus was an increase in applicants to their Open Calls with a clear tendency toward group work or collective work. Having received a range of contributions, apexart were very keen that this book would not just valorize personal narratives or self-branding approaches, so they asked me to take on the project as editor, where my text would frame ideas in a wider context. Elizabeth Larison's introduction expands on the specifics from apexart's perspective.

I see collective or group work as most clearly defined in artistic practices, and as all artistic work is somehow curatorial, but perhaps less overt in some practices. Art and curating as collaborative work started to become increasingly prominent in the early 2000s, when multiple histories of curatorial and artistic practices emerged, and the relationship between group work and this murky territory around who does what and how, and why certain artists become visible—often under influence of market mechanisms—and others don't, became a focus point.

When I wrote that initial text in the early 2000s, and re-wrote it for this book, one thing I firmly maintain is that we never work alone. One of my key concerns is how you articulate that not working alone and demystify the way in which we work with others while not mythologizing or romanticizing group, collective, or collaborative work as the natural outcome of a process of critique of individualism or individual authorship. In the shift toward the collaborative or collective turn in the late 1990s and early 2000s, certain collectives were highlighted while others were not and that also raised questions for me.

GvN: There are comprehensive summaries of the nuanced differences between various kinds of artistic collaboration and collectivity, and where and how they might and might not overlap. You reworked that early 2000s text for a thematic issue of *Manifesta Journal*, around 2010, in which a range of voices explored what curatorial collaboration might entail and what it could lead to. However,

in that embrace of plurality, stepping away from the singular and individual in practice, there seems to have been a replacement of one for the other without the language to describe what unfolds changing all that much. This makes me wonder whether “collaboration” and “collective” are themselves generic umbrella terms that mask the complexities that lie behind them.

Which is why, when looking at your text for this publication, I suggested we revisit your initial submission and consider whether in the expanding debate around group and collective and collaborative work, the terms have shifted at all. Several contributions to this volume speak to that real tension between changes in practice and how they are then talked about, which is reflected in public perception and critical reception; think for instance of documenta 15, which Gregory Sholette expands on in his essay here. Is the complexity of practices mirrored in their critiques, or are we all still struggling to articulate pluralistic diversity and complexity in what we see or encounter?

PON: Critique of single authorship, and replacing the singular with the plural, or the singular with versions of the plural, also emerged in the 1990s in relation to relational practices, and the various biennials taking on the collective global curating as a space of the creative multitude, cultural pluralism and multiple identity formations. The early 2000s were also a pivotal period because of the incorporation of the collaborative as a methodology within institution-building, as critique of older models and as part of newly emergent forms. Trying to distinguish between what constitutes a collective and what constitutes collaboration, collaboration for me is much more a methodology of how you work with others and how you then make that process of working with others apparent in how you inscribe the practice. I understand a collective as a group of people coming together with a common agenda or urgent goal in mind; often there is an investment in instituting change, or transformation, or a common ideology. This is why collectives are often more a mechanism of

defense, or a force for change that uses collaboration as a methodology. Some collectives work very collaboratively, some do not work collaboratively at all.

In trying to more comprehensively disclose or understand the rationale for the shift toward collective work or a collaboration, it's also useful to realize it's been happening for forever. It's not new. What has changed is that a different language, a different vocabulary has emerged, or is constantly emerging, indoctrinating, and inscribing, and in a way valorizing, certain ways of working collectively above others. That is the moment we're in now, but it's still subsumed within a culture of individualism and superseded by a focus and emphasis on the self and self-care and being together alone. This language didn't come from nowhere, it comes from an emphasis on the self, and the neoliberalization of the self via social media image projection. To project oneself as being collective, individually, is an incredible promotional tool for many media savvy people, including artists and curators. I'm talking across disciplines, from the visual to pop music, they all have facilitated a kind of a self-image that's ultimately a portrayal of some sort of idea of the collective or of something bigger than the self that is really situated in individualism. This drive toward the collective as a space of rethinking our space of critique is still very submerged within a bigger field of selfishness.

There is also a distinction with certain curators taking over institutions in the early 2000s—like Maria Lind at Kunstverein Munich, or Charles Esche at the Rooseum in Malmö, or Catherine David at Witte de With in Rotterdam, Hans Ulrich Obrist at Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, or Hou Hanru at the San Francisco Art Institute, or the significance of Thelma Golden in 2000 starting as Deputy Director at The Studio Museum in Harlem—in a bid to debate the expanding role of the art institution beyond exhibition-making, accounting for an expanded practice, including attention for identity politics and the importance

of archiving such practice. There is also the significance of curatorial initiatives such as INIVA, established already in 1994, or Asia Art Archive, founded in 2000, around the same time as globally nomadic curators initiating curatorial project like the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Alongside these curators, you saw artists claiming a certain investment in collaboration or in group work entering institutions to try and transform them into critical structures and make the collaborative methodology apparent within those institutions, or across a range of emergent new biennials in the first decade of this century. Most cases were short-lived experiences that were part of “new institutionalism,” as it was called then, which became a diluted form of collaborative work. By the late 1990s and early 2000s there was an increasing number of new cooperative-oriented institutions as diverse and geographically dispersed as Parasite in Hong Kong, or the nomadic *If I Can't Dance...* in Amsterdam, Chimurenga in Cape Town, Bétonsalon in Paris, What, How and for Whom in Zagreb, Raw Material in Dakar, or Casco and BAK in Utrecht, or Grupo Ectétera in Argentina. They and many others led the way to shifting curatorial work away from authorial structures toward modes of group work.

One of the problems with this replacement of the singular with the plural is how the plural came to be seen as good and the singular as bad. For me a greater engagement with what is good or bad practice within pluralities, and this distinction between the collective as a kind of form of instituting and collaboration as methodology, or different methodologies or different ways of working together, ethically or unethically, is important. Discussions around these distinctions started in the early 2000s, with resistance to the idea of collaboration or collective work as necessarily a good thing emerging. There were also people like SUPERFLEX and others articulating collective work as a conduit to the art market because it was perceived as something that was more diffuse and more redistributable,

as an alternative to the focus on the individual or working with a singular artist.

I think it's also important to acknowledge how necessary it has been within my own writing practice to collaborate with people, including yourself, and to make that more apparent within editorial structures and within collaborative structures. How do you create spaces within your own work to enable your collaborators to do their thing, and support your own thing? That has been quite important for me. The three books that I worked on while at Bard—*The Curatorial Conundrum*, *How Institutions Think* and *Curating After the Global*—were in a way trying to find out how by involving multiple editors and multiple authors you can almost disappear as an editor, as author, within that matrix of other people's positions. These anthologies are spaces of constant negotiation, renegotiation, and reenactment of recognition, with a breakdown of clarity of whose words and whose voice they are. That is what's great about anthologies—when you're working very closely with the authors, putting in that effort.

GvN: What you're hinting at is indeed a dichotomy between practice and its articulation, how we talk about it, and it's therefore useful to think about the different positions within this book, with contributors situated in different parts of the world engaged in different kinds of problematics. From their geographically, politically, socially specific positions, they present their views, but they do so in response to a specific invitation, from you as an editor, for a specific context, this book, in a process of writing, with me as another editor. Collaboratively we try to figure out what can be said and how, and that contributes to a thinking about ways of collaborating that is specific but also becomes part of this wider thinking through publishing.

That's why I see the writing for and publication in books like these as a very collaborative process too, where value lies in working carefully, going back and forth and back and forth again. In the case of this book, Elizabeth also entering the equation, with a different perspective, coming from a different position, questioning how certain

things were said and why, and how that might land with readers in other contexts. That process of articulation through reflection, response, a further response, a further reiteration is a slow process. The embrace of that process as iterative, as productive, for me is an integral part of articulation. In the case of your text, that meant taking into account the starting point as well as the first revisit and then add another revisit for this anthology; when most other texts had come in, thinking whether it made sense to work on it again, where it was not about trying to cover all bases, but rather about stepping into that collaborative space of figuring out what was important to say and how now, compared to the early 2000s or a decade ago. There was a clarity of thinking in your initial ideas on collective ways of working, particularly in artistic practices, while collaborative and group working are here considered through a more curatorial lens. Now we're in the early 2020s, other ideas have entered the field—not only about collaborative and collective working, but also notions like “the curatorial,” underlining the complexity of collaboration as something that isn't just one thing, that does something very specific, trying to open that up...

PON: That's very much what comes across in the cluster or constellation of positions, or collaborative imaginaries in the essays we received. Each text has an internal logic or an internal conversation about the curatorial as collective or collaborative work but is here situated in a wider, global context. Within my own essay, I discuss paradigmatic collectives, like General Idea, Group Material, and Art & Language. These collectives or artists' groups were being reconsidered two decades ago as important to a rethinking of the “genius” of the artist and individualism. Group Material and General Idea both emerged at a very political moment, with the AIDS crisis and queer political activist agendas in the 1980s. They need to be seen in relation to the specifics of that decade, not only in terms of the concerns, issues, and questions they were asking, but also what they were doing in the ways of working together and ways of thinking about distributed practice. There were also numerous other hybrid art collectives globally active during the early to mid 1980s such as Godzilla:

Asian American Arts Network, or Gutai Group in Japan, IRWIN from former Yugoslavia, or the UK-based Black Audio Film Collective, who were testing collaborative modes of co-production, while operating within the global networks of art and exhibition production within and beyond non-Western global perspectives.

The exhibition *Collective Creativity* by WHW at the Fridericianum in Kassel (2005) was an important marker of this increased interest. More recent events, such as WHW being appointed directors of the Kunsthalle Vienna (in 2019), and ruangrupa being appointed as the first curatorial collective to take over documenta in 2022, underline a different shift toward collective work within bigger institutions. In addition, appointing a non-Western curatorial collective for documenta and them inviting other curatorial and artistic collectives as part of their methodology, their presentation of a new global order..., these are important moments to reflect on. But while the *Collective Creativity* show was very much applauded, and announced this emergent agenda, WHW becoming directors in Vienna was very problematic for the institution and for that collective, for lots of different reasons. Similarly, the kickback toward documenta 15, with various political agendas coming together, demonstrated that changes aren't a smooth or clear processes. The texts in this book try and trace the complex convergences of this moment as something quite different to what was happening at the beginning of this century, while making connections with other important practices and conversations happening more on the fringes of these more dominant art-worldly narratives.

GvN: Thinking about that difference, galvanizing a group of people around a common cause that underpinned working as a collective in the 1980s as you outline in your text, clearly runs into trouble in the context of the quite regressive political, social tendencies that we find ourselves among, globally. For a long time, there was a sense that collaborative and collective ways of working provided an alternative

and there were spaces that could be occupied beyond or alongside the market. Over the last 25 years there has been a diversification, both in artistic and curatorial practices, where those ways of working could manifest themselves. The accumulation or possibility of what some people still perceive as alternative ways of operating, and the problems surrounding them entering the more institutionalized, mainstream arenas like documenta has highlighted that there is still great apprehension, exacerbated by our current challenging times.

Picking up on a previous point; the perceived value of what people do is also tied to those articulations, and what you called inscriptions, like yours around Group Material and General Idea, but going back and asking again: what happened there? Revisiting is a wider phenomenon in the art world now; you see it in the amount of people reflecting on the 1990s. Wondering: what was the value? How can we look at it from today's perspective? Which is part of an ongoing process of articulation and re-articulation. I see an incredible value in continuing to do that, particularly because of those regressive responses to WHW and documenta 15. What was the outcome of that way of working then? What could it be now? What has shifted, what has broadened out, or hasn't? There is a clear impetus to keep trying, both in practice and in reflection, but maybe slightly differently.

PON: I think the shift was not from one system of artistic production to another, but more one of different ways of imagining how we could work together, and how to really embed such methodological processes within institutional reimagining. The art world excludes, or at least makes it less apparent, that documenta, and many other curatorial projects, are a collective endeavor too. Every documenta that's seemingly directed by one visible director has always been realized via different forms of group work. The valorizing machine tries to erase considerable chunks of such histories—where ruangrupa's collective of collectives, and their unique geopolitical contexts and activist agendas, including different feminist, queer, ecological, environmental, human rights agendas, and so on, are met with resistance. This intersectionality was very palpable, where it wasn't

one political agenda superseding another, allowing for a certain kind of messiness. Think also of the Turner Prize deciding to award its prize to so-called collectives; it must be very difficult for the institution to understand how their decisions are being made because they're not given the time or the space to even be able to imagine what they could do collectively and collaboratively.

GvN: Early critiques of collaborative working and socially engaged art railed against the attention for process over product. Within institutions, and entities like documenta, the lack of time always leads to a tension because at some stage the doors need to open, something needs to be made visible. The Turner Prize is interesting in that sense: it's a celebration, but a celebration of what, and for whom?—to stick to the Ws. The question embedded in the name WHW indicates a kind of grappling with bigger concerns around what is being produced—for whom indeed? In that sense, groups like WHW and Raqs have taken on the challenge and seem to be able to endure in different kinds of contexts and really stay with the problematics that their ways of working highlight. They've stuck with it as a mode of practice and with being articulate about not doing this within just their collective but stepping into situations that broaden the potential of collective and collaborative thinking. I am using these words interchangeably on purpose here, because sometimes it is more collaborative, and sometimes it is explicitly collective. That's an ongoing process of taking time and committing to the time that is needed, which is of course a luxury that isn't always available.

PON: In relation to the durational or temporal process, what's clear for me is this saturation of time in the exhibition as form. The exhibition is the materialization of a process of gathering, or of being in contradiction to one another; the exhibition is a space where these contradictions and disagreements, or antagonism or agonisms are on display or exposed in some way and then debated and discussed. That means using the exhibition as a kind of discursive space, or as a discursive site, within which the process guides or takes shape regardless of its form, a moment when these things are discussed and debated. That is also

something that emanates from collaborative work, which you see with General Idea and Group Material: when you look at those genealogies, you see an investment in the exhibition as a space of saturation, as a space of concentration, where cooperative, collective, and group thinking and working come together, are formulated, or articulated, or (re)presented. This interest or investment in the exhibition as a space within which time gathers its form or concentrates is relatively novel and relatively emergent still. That is where this idea of “the curatorial” becomes a space of inquiry for both artists and curators.

In the last three years, the notion of care and togetherness have of course become prevalent, whereas togetherness and care have been completely lacking—not only within our own lives, but also within systems of governance and their institutions, such as healthcare, mental healthcare, travel, mobility, water, and other resources. All of which are part of being together. The over-emphasis on care in the art world creates this romantic idea of the art world as a space within which care can happen, while it's not happening anywhere else. This is why Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung's text within this book is very important in terms of arguing for a nuanced critique of care as a generic curatorial term, where an etymology of curating as care for art, artists, or the world is quite delusory given the market-driven forces of curators' careers in an art world rife with competition, injustice, inequality, and an imbalanced relationship with the real needs of others. That is something that requires differentiation, further investigation, extensive debate, and a reimagining of the specific types of workspaces encapsulated in and supported by or through collective labor, or spaces of exhibition, or cooperative making processes.

I think it was also important to mark this post-documenta 15 moment in relation to other cooperative, collaborative, and collective projects happening elsewhere in the world that do not have the same visibility or the same representability within contemporary discourses—as those evoked in