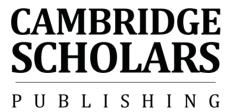# The Design Collective

The Design Collective:
An Approach to Practice

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

HARRIET EDQUIST AND LAURENE VAUGHAN

The rise of social networking and open-source technology, the return of community-focussed activities (e.g. gardens, knitting groups, food cooperatives) and creative collectives across the fields of design and the visual and performing arts have reawakened the discourse around human capital, flat structures and collectives as a means for "making" the things of everyday life. As the essays presented in this collection illustrate, there is an emerging field of discourse about the potential of the collective as an organising and generative community structure that links creativity, social change and politics. Furthermore it is clear that in this developing context there are a number of issues central to design practice, such as authorship, agency and aesthetics that are in the process of re-evaluation and critique. Bringing together views of practitioners, historians and theorists this volume examines the etymology, boundaries and practices that the idea of the collective affords.

The collection is broadly organised into sections on architecture, digital technologies and counter-cultural practices. It combines historical and contemporary accounts of design collectives from a range of disciplinary viewpoints including architecture, design, visual and performing arts as well as social and cultural theory. The various approaches provide frameworks for understanding and contextualising these explorations into collective practice whether predicated on digital or analogue technologies. What becomes apparent is that while typically associated with a "celebrity designer" or understood to have been produced within elaborate organisations that span the functions of the supply chain, design as a collective and/or community action is alive and well. In fact, as is often the case, design in practice and as outcome, mirrors broader social shifts. As such it could be argued that, just as we are seeing shifts in recognition and realisation of collective and communal influence for change, from the rise of localised co-operatives for food, banking and power supply, to large scale transformation of governments and the recognition of nation states; these uprisings and transformations

are in fact design transformations. Design and designers do not practise in isolation; as citizens and as the providers of professional expertise designers contribute to how we socially, culturally and economically manifest the world that we live in.

In her introductory chapter "Design collectives: More than the sum of their parts", Laurene Vaughan reminds us that 2012 has been declared the United Nations Year of the Cooperative, in recognition of the fact that "cooperative enterprises build a better world", that they "empower people" and "promote democratic principles". Within this framework Vaughan focuses her attention on the terminology we use to describe collective practices, noting the many ways in which they operate and observing the nuances that reside within the associated terms collective, co-operative, collaboration and community. Vaughan is particularly interested in the idea of sharing, the common thread behind all forms of cooperative practice whether it be shared experience, expertise or meaning, and she elaborates this idea through a number of case studies from Australia and elsewhere.

Pia Ednie Brown's essay "Creaturely Collectives: Parametricism and getting to the afterparty" is the first in a group of four essays dealing with architectural practice. She begins by making reference to Gilbert Simondon's view that "within the collective we endeavour to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax", and in common with a number of authors in this collection focuses on the often fraught relationship between the individual and the collective, their inter-relatedness and co-creation. She elaborates her thesis within the design territory of digital, generative technologies, arguing that it is manifest in the design process itself rather than in the collective organisation of the designers. In this constantly evolving and emergent design domain, Ednie-Brown focuses on the idea of style, in particular "parametricism", as a way to define the issue of collectivity in contemporary architectural practice.

If, for Ednie-Brown, the notion of the collective resides in the realm of the aesthetic, for the following three authors it is negotiated within the collective organisation of the designers. Julia Dwyer's "Inscription as a collective practice: Taking Place and "The Other Side of Waiting" looks at the organisation and work of a loose architectural collective Taking Place which was formed in 2001 and whose work, *The Other Side of Waiting*, installed in the spaces of a peri-natal facility at Homerton University Hospital is exemplary of their practice. Dwyer begins her investigation by

noting what she refers to as "the collective instincts in much feminist spatial practice", and reflects on the circumstances that led to the formation of Taking Place. It had emerged out of "Alterities", a conference convened by Doina Petrescu at the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris in 1999 which brought together a number of feminist practitioners. Amongst them was Matrix, a feminist design co-operative established in 1980 which was one of the first architectural groups in Britain to take an overtly feminist stance in their way of working. Dwyer was one of the founders of Matrix which has had a formative influence in establishing what can now be seen as an historical feminist lineage in architectural practice. *Muf*, a collaborative London-based studio founded in 1996 by three women (two architects and an artist) also presented at "Alterities" and it is still active. Melanie Dodd, a foundation member of *muf*, has carried on its original ethos of socially engaged art practice, temporary events, research, writing, exhibitions, public space and buildings although she does so from Melbourne where she is a practitioner and academic at RMIT University. Like many of the collectives discussed in this volume, *muf* resists the lure of the single author, rather promoting the "We" that comprises multiple "I's", a collective identity which allows for individual autonomy and authorship and flexibly accommodates individual desires and careers. Dodd's essay "Practicing generosity: the hospitality of collective space" describes a project undertaken in Melbourne in 2009 *What Do You Do and Where Do You Do it?* Here *muf* was concerned particularly to engage with notions of generosity which describe what Dodd refers to as "the co-production of socially engaged art practices". These often have porous boundaries, are fluid and resist disciplinary or other categorisation and importantly, resist the single author. If the continuing influence of Matrix can be seen in the work of Taking Place and *muf* today, it had already been felt in Melbourne in the 1980s and formed one of the contexts that produced a feminist architectural collective E1027 (1990-1992). Karen Burns begins her discussion of this practice, "E1027: From modernist house to feminist collective" by commenting on the origins of the name. For decades the authorship of Eileen Gray's iconic house in France, E1027, had been contested but in the 1980s it was being rediscovered by feminist historians. It forms a metaphor which frames the argument that Burns puts forward about the context, intentions and activities of this short-lived collective. E1027 initially counted 76 members, architects, historians, theorists and artists, some of whom were older practitioners who had established an earlier collective feminist organisation "Women in Architecture" in Melbourne and who passed on their experiences to the

younger group. Burns concludes her essay with an account of one of the major outcomes of E1027, an exhibition "Insight/Out 1992" organised by a group of ten women who, like *muf*, resisted architecture's preferred designation of the sole author negotiating instead in a variety of ways the idea of co-creation.

Contemporary digital technologies have transformed the possibilities for collective endeavour not only in the realm of digital practice, but also in the analogue world of meeting and making. In her essay "Play of Display: Videogame Collectives and Museum Culture", Helen Stuckey raises issues of authority and permanence as they relate to the ways in which cultural organisations collect games and associated gaming technologies. How can such official entities associated with permanence and elitism, adapt to this new domain, and adopt new collections approaches to this dynamic area of creative cultural production. How can a curator exhibit an experience as artefact? Who is the author in a game that has been created by an opensource collective of un-named contributors, some making, some hacking and all working in the co-production of an outcome? Angelina Russo extends this area of inquiry into what new modes of collective creative development, in particular the handmade design and craft sectors, mean for cultural institutions. Through the context of a crochet practice, she critiques the growing discourse around social media and maker driven online marketplaces as new economic models for innovation. In this context social networks are more than places to meet; rather they are places for co-creation. At times this creation is in the physical making of things, at others it is distributed economic survival occurring outside of mainstream structures of retail, in either the analogue or digital domains.

It is impossible to consider design collectives outside economic or political action, whether their actions are sanctioned by some authority, such as the state or governing body, or exist as rogue entities acting in revolt against oppressors of some form. With contemporary social and economic structures highlighting the importance of the individual and their advancement in every aspect of life, structures that value the benefit and promotion of the many over one continue to jolt the system. Katherine Moline explores the ways in which two design entities have questioned the focus on the designer as individual through a critique of the work of the Italian collective known as *Global Tools* and the French experimental designer *Matali Crasset*. Through these case studies Moline explores how their respective collective approaches, either as a community or through

the adaptation of mass produced nameless products into high end design outcomes, challenge and contribute to contemporary discourses on the separation between designer as producer and community as consumer.

In contrast to these examples of design collectives as radical outsiders, Robyn Healy and Lesley Whitworth present two examples of sanctioned design collectives. Robyn Healy takes us into the heady world of the *Fashion Design Council (FDC).* Funded by Federal and State governments the *FDC* was active in Melbourne in the 1980s and 1990s, its founders and members perceiving themselves to be radical young blood, ready to transform the "bland middle ground" through an integration of fashion with art, music and architecture (Wood 1986). Financial survival combined with radical creativity was their ambition, underwritten by the authorities of the mainstream. Lesley Whitworth on the other hand traces the establishment of the Council of Industrial Design in the UK after WWII. This council was the first British government sponsored design forum that was founded on the desire to utilise collective expertise and consumer engagement as a means to consolidate an area of industrial expertise and thereby contribute to the growth and wellbeing of the nation as a whole.

During the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s protest movements energised around opposition to the Vietnam War, support for nuclear disarmament, feminism, gay and lesbian rights and Aboriginal land rights. Amongst their weapons of mass communication were the radically re-designed poster and an accompanying soundtrack of popular music which combined political dissent with collective disdain of mainstream culture. The final group of essays in this collection look at these intertwined forms of collective activity and protest in Australia and New Zealand over three decades. In her essay "Earthworks and Beyond", Jess Berry examines the pioneering role of the Earthworks Poster Collective which operated a screen-printing workshop out of the Tin Sheds Gallery at the University of Sydney between 1972 and 1979. Earthworks was influential not only for its legacy of iconic leftist, anti-establishment imagery but also for its modes of collective production and Berry shows how its legacy flowed north into hard-core conservative Queensland. At Griffith University the Earthworks model was adopted by the Queensland Film and Drama Centre, established by Michael Callaghan with University support and it was from this experience that Callaghan went on to found Redback Graphix. Similar tactics to Earthworks and Redback were adopted by the small short-lived Black Banana Poster

Collective which was established in 1986. Inkahoots followed in the early 1990s as a public-access collective catering to community-based groups and causes. Still in operation, they survived by making the shift from poster collective to mainstream design studio. What is interesting about these examples is that they existed within institutional frameworks. Earthworks enjoyed "invisible support" from the University of Sydney, in particular its sympathetic Vice Chancellor, Bruce Williams. More interestingly in 1973 the Whitlam government, against some resistance, established the Australia Council's Community Arts Fund as a way to decentralise arts funding and increase opportunities for access, and in 1978 this became the Community Arts Board. Both Inkahoots and Redback accessed funding from this source in the early years which stipulated a collaborative practice model. Later the Fashion Design Council in Melbourne was to do the same.

Back in Melbourne, Ted Hopkins had established Backyard Press in 1976 in the inner suburb of Prahran, the centre of an active live music scene. As Marius Foley shows in "Collective Identities", Backyard Press and the music scene grew up together, performers commissioning graphic work from the press while work and social life, the press and the gigs, melded into each other. Backyard Press made money and in the 1970s and 1980s was Australia's most prolific poster printing concern, helping to define, as Foley argues, Melbourne's visual style. In addition the rapidly growing facility was opened to other poster makers like RASCALS (Rational and Sane Citizens against Liberal Stupidity), encouraging an ongoing state of experiment and change. In the 1980s its structure changed, when the Victorian government established the Co-operative Development Program to support collective and co-operative enterprises with funding and other assistance. Certain managerial practices had to be in place to access this support and, as in the case of Inkahoots and others, survival rested on the negotiations that were made between the demands of the greater economy (and ongoing viability) and the autonomy of the collective workplace.

Institutional support of any kind does not seem to have been available to the two innovative New Zealand record collectives discussed by Sian O'Gorman in "Creative Ecologies": Flying Nun Records 1981-1997; Xpressway 1988-1993. O'Gorman uses an ecological model of growth and development adapted from biological science to interrogate the life of these collectives and the album artwork and gig posters they gave rise to. Flying Nun records was established by Christchurch record store owner

Roger Shepherd along the line of DIY creation and distribution principles. However, the enterprise entered a new level when Shepherd signed a manufacturing and licensing deal with an Australian label in 1987 after EMI closed New Zealand's only vinyl pressing plant and in 1990 moved to Auckland. Orienting the business to the international market, Shepherd took Flying Nun offshore to the UK leaving its DIY roots behind. Musician Bruce Russell had been associated with Flying Nun and set up Xpressway in 1988 to try to re-capture some of Flying Nun's original ethos he felt had been lost to globalisation (Russell, B 1988). Along the way Xpressway developed a different model of globalisation, creating a label that was cohesive, had a strong internal visual and music aesthetic and focussed on the worldwide underground scene. Although relatively short-lived compared with Flying Nun, Xpressway demonstrated the viability of a marginal culture emanating from a small country if approached in an innovative way.

CHAPTER ONE

DESIGN COLLECTIVES:
MORE THAN THE SUM OF THEIR PARTS

LAURENE VAUGHAN

The phrase "design collective" rolls off the tongue so easily. A concept and a structure that is a familiar part of the design vernacular, and yet little is written on design collectives as a phenomenon. Socially, culturally and politically collectivism as a means to establish an agenda, an alternative economic structure and a way to overcome the limitations of isolation has existed for thousands of years. Whether it has been formal or ad hoc, from family businesses or local community developments, utilising the possibility of collective endeavour has framed much of the development of modern society and modern business practices.

Within the contemporary context collectivism, particularly in the form of cooperatives is on the rise. Post the global financial crisis of the late 2000s; people in localised communities are seeking alternate ways of structuring their lives. From banks to power companies, community gardens and new market places, individuals no longer trust major corporations nor governments, electing to come together in communities, seeking equity as they establish alternate approaches to sustainable living: sustainable environmentally, economically and culturally. New technologies have enabled a new sense of "localised community" to emerge. Local is no longer limited only to geographic proximity, the experience of local defined through a framework of shared concerns, can now be a distributed community of like-minded and committed people, sharing and working together through technology in multiple locations.

Poignantly 2012 has been declared the United Nations International Year of the Cooperative; its position being, "Cooperatives build a better world" (2012). This better world realised through collective human endeavour is framed as the following:

- *Cooperative enterprises build a better world*
- *Cooperative enterprises are member owned, member serving and member driven*
- *Cooperatives empower people*
- *Cooperatives improve livelihoods and strengthen the economy*
- *Cooperatives enable sustainable development*
- *Cooperatives promote rural development*
- *Cooperatives balance both social and economic demands*
- *Cooperatives promote democratic principles*
- *Cooperatives and gender: a pathway out of poverty*
- *Cooperatives: a sustainable business model for youth*

These are grand ambitions, and evidence the belief that exists in the power of people, and particular the possibility for positive change that can occur when people work towards a shared goal, when they cooperate. But what does this mean for design collectives? Where is design within this list of ambitions and proposed contexts for the value add of group activity? I would argue that it is everywhere. Although un-named as a particular entity within such cooperatives, design in its many manifestations from form making to problem solving, can make a significant contribution in the desire to build a better world.

Individuation and the collective life of individual things

In the literature and people's accounts of being part of a collective the terms: collective, co-operative, collaboration and community are used interchangeably to position and explain actions and absences. Based on Oxford English Dictionary definitions we can say that a collective is something undertaken by people acting as a group. In this case there is a sense of cohesion or shared intent. In contrast a cooperative is founded on a premise of people coming together for mutual assistance in working towards a common goal. To collaborate is to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort. Each of these formations are premised on a coming together of individuals to work as a group with shared intention and it is on this basis that the term community is often used to describe what happens there. For example a collective or a cooperative is a community of like-minded individuals committed to some shared action or outcome. But what is a community?

There are numerous definitions of what a community is, but typically it is a combination of geographic or political interconnectedness. It may refer to a group of people living in the same locality or under the same government. For example this is our "local community" or nation state. A community may also be comprised of a group of people with shared interests, from sport, to the arts or a political issue. Across a community there may also be some shared identity or similarity that is recognisable to others; such as team colours, name, uniform, logo or flag. This community could be founded on a connection based on gender, race, religion, cultural background, sexuality or profession. Such a community may include expectations of sharing, participation or fellowship. In broader terms, ecologically a community many also refer to a group of interdependent organisms interacting in similar conditions (of any scale from pond to plant) for shared wellbeing and survival. In this way it can be argued that across all these definitions it is people with some form of shared circumstances and intent that is the consistent thread (individuals harnessed as a group), which can be named as a community of intent that is, a collective.

In discussions of particular collectives, the term co-operative is often used to describe the structure of the organisation. In this instance there is an expectation of members working towards a common or shared goal; there is shared ownership of the entity and any associated items, and that there will be shared benefits from this connection. In a co-operative there are shared intentions, contexts and ownership, underpinned by a willingness to work in conjunction with others.

Collaboration is another term that is used to describe people's approaches to working in relation to others. The use of the terms collaboration or collaborative emphasises the aspects of co-production that are essential to what is done; it is both a methodology and a political position. To speak of a collaboration, is to emphasise that activities are undertaken by individuals toward a shared outcome, and to negate notions of individuals working in isolation in some form of shared context. Although a collective may have many points of interconnection and the co-production of ideas, products or actions may be part of it, yet collaboration is not essential. For although there may be a decision to benefit through the co-habitation of a space or infrastructure, or the sharing of responsibilities or ideology, these may in fact be the only points of connection.

Sharing

From opensource publication development (Leadbeater 2008), to the phenomenon of sharing and making together (Gauntlett 2011); there is an increasing discourse in relation to contemporary social media of the benefits and potential creative benefits, of distributed ownership and methods of producing a range of items for sale or use. This has given rise to entrepreneurial sharing sites and marketplaces such as *Etsy.com* and *shareable.net,* or open-source investment sites such as *kickstarter.* Such sites are not framed within the context of a secure or closed entity such as a collective, but they do reference the power of many and shared investment for individual benefit. This same discourse is also found in models for sustainable living and community development (Hobson and Hill 2011). Across these contexts it is the potential expansion of the individual to the many and a level of responsiveness, shared expenditure and shared income that lead Rogers and Tonkinwise (2011) to argue that this is essential for individual, social and environmental benefit.

The catalyst for forming or joining a collective varies with each individual. From economic survival to creative impetus, accounts for the establishment of a collective are grounded in the belief that there are gains to be made through connection, and that the collective will be greater than the sum of its parts.

Shared experiences

Many designers running solo studios as freelancers speak of the challenges of isolation in their practices. As much as they wish to maintain their independence, they equally lament the hours spent designing on their own in their studios or at their kitchen tables. They lack the creative interaction, spontaneous brainstorming or critique that happens in shared studios or just the general day to day exchanges of a communal workplace. This is the price of freedom; freedom of business integrity, creative independence and flexible work hours. Over recent years we have also seen local governments establishing such shared studio spaces, often converting old buildings in areas of low rent and desired commercial and cultural rejuvenation. Shared studio spaces also mean shared costs, and spaces that would not be available to individuals become accessible through the increased buying power of many small entities joining together. This is particularly relevant to rental costs, but also includes decisions for shared investment in facilities and specialised equipment.

The establishment of the Interboro Partners (2002) shared studio space in New York, is an example of such an entity. Initially a group of designers decided to rent a dilapidated building with the aim of creating a studio space where creative practitioners including designers, could work as a loose community; benefiting from distributed expenses and from the creative community that inhabited the building. What started off as a small enterprise where a group of friends developed a situation that would be of benefit to them and possibly other people who would join, has blossomed into a high demand creative community with waiting lists for future occupancy.

To address the challenges of isolation and micro business models, designers often select to work in such cooperative style studios, where they are able to rent space (which can be as little as a hot desk) in either these subsidised spaces or conventional commercial studios, so that they can find a balance between independence and community. In this context there is an ambition that the shared experiences that will be realised through spatial connection will have personal, economic and creative benefits. These are communities of designers acting collectively through a framework of proximity, but these are not what we would call design collectives.

Shared yet distributed expertise

The terms collectives or cooperatives are also used as a way to name "loose business models" of design studios. Many such as the Design Collective (a design firm located in Maryland and North Carolina, USA) or Troika (1912) (London) promote themselves as a creative interdisciplinary studio community who, through their diversity are able to offer unique design solutions for clients. Their vision is that design and design solutions are their shared point of interconnection, but their divergent expertise enables innovation in a manner that more formal or focussed design consultancies can. These "loose studios" are often held together through the management of a core business structure, where there are a few core designers who are the face of the brand of the studio, then in response to project possibilities external experts are brought in on a project basis.

It is deceiving to name these fluid studios of ever expanding and contracting expertise, as design collectives. The sharing of intent, beyond a project brief, is minimal, and the drive for design exploration is purely

commercial (in that it enables a studio to realise a project brief or a successful bid) and in fact draws many similarities to the business model based on contract labour combined with a core staff. It is perhaps better to name these "cooperatives". For the accounts by the designers involved is that these loose studios, provide the contract design experts with freedom to act in a manner that permanent employment does not. Like the price of freedom and associated isolation for being a sole trader, this cooperative approach also enables designers and other experts to have creative freedom, diversity of projects and a dynamic workplace of possibilities with each project team potentially being comprised of new challenges and learnings. For the design studios, it provides them with a dextrous workforce, an open field of potential collaborators and a platform through which they can espouse, connect to and realise contemporary discourses on the innovation benefits of inter- or trans-disciplinarity. Yet for all its benefits it also has to be viewed as an example of a casualised workforce and a fluctuating balance between permanent staff and occasional workers, thereby raising issues of equity and certainty in employment as any such business approach does.

Shared meaning

Consistent with the political heritage of many social and art collectives since the 1900s, there also exists a community of designer collectives whose foundation is not in the benefits of shared infrastructure or studio space, nor is it to leverage the possibilities of difference, rather these studios are grounded in a shared passion or commitment to the practice of design and its social or cultural impact. These studios often conceive of design as an agent of social change, a collaborator to other areas of action from the arts to politics. They embody the possibility of the collective as a community of intent. This does not mean that all the members of a community are the same; often they embrace diversity in expertise or cultural context. They may also openly benefit from shared space and use loose models of employment or payment for projects. Like other studios, they also embrace the possibility of community and collaboration; and as such we may argue that they are not different, just another version of an alternate organisational model. This however is to ignore the impetus for the connection and the community. These are design collectives working as a group often with deliberate individual anonymity.

An example of such an entity is Studio Anybody. This was a studio acting as a collective, it was founded in Melbourne, Australia in the late nineteen nineties by a group of graphic designers with common interests, whose intention was "to develop a studio research practice model to keep us engaged, reflective and motivated" (Millson & Grocott 2002). Studio Anybody's practice integrated experimental commercial graphic design work, where the commitment was to investigating graphic design as a cultural practice, undertaken in conjunction with networked political actions such as the 2003 Protests for Peace and against War on Iraq campaign. Many of the studio members and affiliates, were undertaking graduate research degrees through practice, this critical and reflective approach design underpinned the Studio's ethos and practice. Integrating commerce with the academy, fashion promotion with political rallies, this was a design collective connected through a shared ethos and resultant practice.

The interconnections between graphic designers with political campaigns, is not new. From the cultural uprisings and ambitions for facilitating social change of the Russian Constructivists, to the protest movements of the 1960s and the counter cultural uprisings of Punk globally, the arts and design in their various forms have contributed to political causes. In a contemporary context what was once for the marginal has become mainstream with large advertising and branding corporations being employed and receiving accolades for their role in the success of politicians such as Barack Obama in the United States. But the political impact of design collectives as a counter cultural movement is not a practice of the past. In fact like the uptake of many social and cultural traditions, there is a range of design collectives continuing with the traditions of using the power of design to support social change. The Beehive Collective (Mexico) is an example of such an entity. Integrating art, design, traditional craft and political conviction, this collective is a fluid community whose ethos of sharing is one of the anonymous designer, named only through their connection to the hive. They proudly state that there is no Queen Bee, preferring to work as a flat community, working towards a shared ambition to enhance equity for all. Their support and promotion of the global 90% campaign is an example of this, with them designing and selling posters as fundraising for the movement, whilst at the same time running classes on traditional mosaic methods. The Beehive Collective (2012) blatantly adopts the principles of collectivism, or shared ownership, intent and community, integrating design with art, politics and the environment.

Sharing politics and intent is integral to collectivism, working in collaboration and as a community enables these entities to realise shared outcomes and ambitions that are not limited to personal finances or commercial possibility, but they do embrace the creative potential of diversity.

Design collectives as ecologies of practice

Like the practices and contexts of design, to endeavour to define design collectives through one prism of interpretation is both impossible and limiting. The catalyst and intention of groups of individuals coming together to design together varies from a desire for community, economic necessity and/or political intent. It may in fact be most useful to return to the pond, the ecological metaphor for a community of interdependent and yet individuals that come together, who commune, in shared circumstances and intent; and the circumstances for their connection within the space of the studio, maybe external and activist, or internal and one of financial or creative survival. Whether loosely formed around discrete projects, or firmly committed to a cause, the studio is the pond in which this particular ecology of design practices continues to evolve.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATURELY COLLECTIVES:
PARAMETRICISM AND GETTING
TO THE AFTERPARTY

PIA EDNIE-BROWN

Collectivity

We tend to think of our abilities as our own. If you are particularly good at, for example, coding html, cooking your favourite dish, designing schools, or running a marathon, these abilities would be yours wouldn't they? Yes, to some extent they are personal, individual abilities that have been developed through practice, play and hard work. But they are also collectively acquired—being inseparable from shared abstract structures that organise daily and institutional life, from how bodies are affected by other bodies, and from the shared environments, stories and histories in which we find ourselves.

The individual and the collective are co-created entities that, whether we like it or not, are inseparable. The balance we strike between how we value and enact concern for both collectivity and individuality is a key issue defining political and philosophical standpoints, across which we can see sways of emphasis on individual and/or collective agency. At one end of the scale we find, for instance, the objectivist individualism of Ayn Rand, sketched out architecturally in her novel, *The Fountainhead*. At the other, more cooperatively inclined end of the swing, there are collectivist models of pre-modern architectural histories, and now, the contemporary interest in non-hierarchical, self-organising or emergent organisations, often associated with open-source movements and philosophies. Across various political and socio-cultural models of organisation, the relationship between the individual and the collective is always in the balance. A noticeable swing of interest toward collectivity in recent decades has, in its

fresher forms, involved attempts to acknowledge this balancing act, or of finding ways to working *in* the balance.

A good example of this can be found in Paulo Virno et al.'s little book, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, which describes contemporary collectivity in terms of the "multitude" as occupying "a middle region between "individual and collective"" (Virno et al. 2004, p. 25). In formulating how the multitude occupies this middle region, Virno draws on the work of Gilbert Simondon (Virno et al. 2004, p. 79) and his principle of individuation, in which

> the collective, the collective experience, the life of the group, is not, as we usually believe, the sphere within which the salient traits of a singular individual diminish or disappear; on the contrary, it is the terrain of the new and more radical individuation. By participating in a collective, the subject, far from surrendering the most unique individual traits, has the opportunity to individuate, at least in part, the share of pre-individual reality which all individuals carry within themselves. According to Simondon, within the collective we endeavour to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax.

This statement can be confirmed by experiences in which group activity becomes an energising force that helps us develop, realise and work better with our own particularities, generally for the benefit of everyone. However, most of us will also know of group situations that dulled energy, suppressed potential, and/or produced conflict that became destructive. Both personal and collective histories offer us many examples of empowerment and disempowerment within political collective assemblages. Amidst the growing cultural interest in forms of collectivity, it is wise to always keep in mind that for all the promises and potential, collective formations have many dark sides as well. Just as working in the balance between collective and individual concerns and agency seems an important ethical place to inhabit so does the balance between brighter utopic and darker dystopic tendencies.

One design territory that has promised the kind of vitality that we might hope for in our collective endeavours is the territory of experimentation with digital, generative techniques. This area has been a hot bed of exploration and development in technique and technology, particularly for the past 20 years but bleeding back to the 50s. Implicitly, this design research opens up questions about collectivity, being invested

in emergent, or self-organising, assemblages that are defined by de-centralised collectives or multitudes of interactions.[1] Here, collective activity is more clearly evident in terms of the design process itself, rather than, necessarily at least, in terms of any collective configuration of designers. As such, this particular territory becomes a useful case study for thinking about the individual-collective equation in design beyond the collective as a group of people working together.

The rhetoric around this territory of digital work has been considerable, and commentary seems to swing between naive optimism and smear campaigns. It is often either the way to brighter futures, or a dire situation. The later position was exemplified by a prominent architectural critic who, at a professional dinner in 2008 in Melbourne, proclaimed that Greg Lynn, central to the wave of digital experimentation launched in the 90s, was "evil". This kind of assessment, generally figured around those who raise questions of ethics to the foreground, can be found in many examples.[2] Swinging in the other direction, Patrik Schumacher's relatively recent packaging of the field into a style called "parametricism" as the next major style after modernism, sports a utopic glow.

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[1] As carefully described and explored in *Collective Intelligence* (Hight & Perry 2006).

[2] An argument for the disturbing effects of digital architecture, assessed as lacking in ethical depth can be found in Ostwald (2004). A related, but far more romantic, response to this field of work can be found in Perez-Gomez (2006, p. 28), where he dismisses the area as fundamentally unethical: "some contemporary architects have sought to collapse 'theory' and 'practice' in new 'algorithmic' processes of design that avoid subjective 'judgement' and produce novelty through instrumental mathematical operations. Made possible by powerful computers and ingenious software the new algorithmic magic creates novelty without love, resulting in short-lived seduction, typically without concern for embodied cultural experience, character and appropriateness". This is echoed, albeit in a more balanced way, in the summary text by Ilka and Andreas Ruby, for their 2011 symposium *NOT MORE NOT LESS. Exploring the wiggle room of contemporary architectural practice*. They write, "The biomorphic paradigm has narrowed down the potential of architecture primarily to issues of geometry, form-making, and manufacturing while depriving it of any political project. On the other hand, there is a programmatic notion of practice which reduces architecture to a predominantly political project, ignoring the fact that a building must eventually embody its contents through its tectonic and formal definition",
<http://www.aml.si/tw/current-events/current-events/dogodki-strani/simpozij/>,
accessed 28 March, 2011.