

Thank You For Asking About Multi-Tasking

A dialogue between Scott Rigby, from the exhibition space and collaborative group BASEKAMP, and Marc Fischer, from the group Temporary Services.

For a couple of years now, Marc and I have had an extremely protracted series of telephone and email discussions, about all kinds of things that apply to our respective practices as individual and collaborative artists. The fact that our caching-up conversations along these lines almost never narrow down to something we can wrap up neatly within a four hour-long phone discussion I think says something about the multifaceted and complex nature of our chosen job descriptions as artists. Earlier this year a Chicago-based art group Marc is a part of, Temporary Services, was invited to exhibit a project at BASEKAMP, an exhibition venue for collaborative art I help run in Philadelphia. During all the preparation, hours of rental truck driving, late night diner excursions, and their installation of the show here, it was a good opportunity for Marc and I to take our mind off 98% of what we each normally do as part of our daily lives, so we could focus temporarily on writing something about why we do so much. If this sounds like a crazy way to spend our almost-free time, well maybe it is, but even so we'd like to write about why we want to spend our time writing about how we normally spend our time, and why this fits in so seamlessly with everything else we each engage ourselves with as part of our art practice.

Scott Rigby: For a growing number of artists, multi-tasking is a desired situation, not something we need to survive. There is always the option to use existing structures for supporting contemporary art, like commercial galleries, dealers, art fairs, etc. But almost any other route requires that we take on alternatives to these roles ourselves. Sometimes artists do this because they feel they have no access to these commercial structures, but for others like you and I, it's a choice we make because we enjoy this kind of life. Marc, can you elaborate on this?

Marc Fischer: I think it's an exciting challenge to take an active role in all aspects of how my work goes out into the world. I like having direct contact with curators, museum administrators, tech crews and fabricators, student helpers, other artists, viewers, people in the press, and anyone else a creative person might have to connect with in order to circulate their ideas. I like knowing the mechanics of how things work. I can't see myself handing everything off to someone who might do those things on my behalf.

I generally don't exhibit in commercial settings or sell the work I make so I don't need someone to pitch my work to collectors or people at art fairs. I don't want my work to be experienced in that way, but that's a longer discussion that maybe we could have another time.

I think it is important to be personally accountable for your work and to try to be available to people who want to talk about it. Doing all of the administrative

work can that comes with representing yourself can be exhausting and time-consuming but I think it's important. It is exciting to incorporate such a broad variety of tasks in one's practice. I love switching back and forth between making things, working by myself, being in a group, collaborating with others, making exhibitions of other people's work, writing essays, designing publications, sending out announcements and participating in dialogues like this one. I view all of this activity as continuous and don't care about making distinctions between where one practice stops and another starts.

Back in the old hardcore punk and underground music scene – which I had a close involvement with for a while – a person could be in a band, organize shows, start a record label, distribute records, publish a 'zine, write articles for someone else's 'zine, and maybe do a college radio show. It all blended together and was simply what one did to support something you cared about. At its best, it was a mutually supportive structure – not competitive. This is still a great model for many other things – I think it's still a relevant way of working on an international scale.

SR: Marc, in addition to being an independent artist you are part of a group [Temporary Services], and within that group you work to see yourselves as individuals rather than a single unit. For example, you all have an aversion to the term "collective." At some point during your visit to Philadelphia, all of you pejoratively mentioned the idea of "group think" within collaboration, in opposition to your practice which is a dialogue between three people and whoever else you choose to work with on a per-project basis. Because, as you suggested, using "collective" to describe a group assumes they operate under a hive mentality. I don't want to misrepresent your point of view. Is this accurate?

MF: Historically the word "collective" has a lot of associations that I think are inaccurate in relation to Temporary Services' work. For example we are not a business, we don't live together, we do not have a distinct and focused common goal in the way that many collectives will organize around a very specific set of issues. The range of things we do is quite broad. We prefer to simply call ourselves a "group" which is more informal and – as a mental image of people working together - is perhaps more open.

The three of us (Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julien, and myself) certainly have interests and concerns that are not always mutual. Collaboration isn't always smooth sailing but we have enough shared values and shared interests that make it possible to reach consensus and work on many things in myriad ways. We often write essays together and let our voices get blended – texts are emailed back and forth and run through an editing gauntlet. It is a challenging and interesting process to find ways to come together on the language, or the aesthetics of a project. Sometimes it is laborious but often it is extremely efficient because three people are pushing each other and working on the same thing.



We also give ourselves the freedom (if not always enough time!) to work outside of the group – either on our own, or in collaborations with other people. There are things I can't expect Brett and Salem to care about as deeply as I do, and likewise for some of their concerns. There are other people I want to work with that they might not. Flexibility, freedom and unlimited experimentation are crucial – as they are in other aspects of life.

SR: Larger cultural notions of rugged individualism, responsibility for one's self – as opposed to providing care to all members of society - and issues like individual culpability for one's own actions (for example, CEOs being held accountable as individuals as opposed to the protection of operating within a corporation), all have something to do with why collaboration in art could mean something larger to people outside of art. How we go about this practice says something about many issues surrounding the changing ideas of what it means to be an individual subject within our culture.

MF: Temporary Services wrote an essay called "Groupings" which digs into the myth of the rugged individual – both in the arts and the rest of the world. Nobody achieves any form of success or builds empires with their own two hands. This is a myth – in the business world and in art (which in its commercial applications often doesn't seem any different). There are endless numbers of relationships that make personal successes possible and it certainly isn't fashionable to acknowledge that many of those relationships may be quite exploitative. Part of what I think both of us are asking for is a greater degree of transparency. We need this from Enron and we need this from Art. An aspect of collaborative work that I think both of us enjoy is that it particularly begs viewers to ask the question "Who

Marc Fischer, 2002, two pages from an untitled free booklet composed of images from free newspapers and phone book advertisements. The booklet is one of many different variations that was distributed in free newspaper dispensers in Chicago and other cities for the project *Dispensing with Formalities*.

was responsible for what?" and from there it becomes easier to talk about all aspects of how a project came to fruition. Anonymity makes personal accountability pretty damn difficult. Trying to be more open is good in all things – not just art practice. I'd appreciate it if our fucking piece of shit President and his Cabinet would try it some time. As we are writing this Bush and Cheney are speaking to the 9/11 Commission and there will be no written transcript or recording of what they say.

SR: Collaboration in art as in anything else means only that people work on something together rather than alone, regardless of the end results or means of getting there. All larger endeavors require more people. War, for example requires collaboration (though it often also requires a purposeful lack of negotiation). In itself, collaboration or its results aren't necessarily anything unusual, significant, worthwhile, or interesting. It depends on the content and the context.

Artist collaborations at worst relive clichés, nostalgic imitations of strategies by historic groups (usually alliances of independent artists – as with Dada or Surrealism) who have achieved notoriety by association. Or just attempt to capitalize on more recent trends in collective work, as the risks become lower. At best, collaborative groups can not only discuss, but activate issues related to interrelation, social structures, collectivity, and negotiation. All of which often arise within, and relate directly to, group activity.

But if collectively produced work by artists' groups can be just as superficial and underwhelming as many individual artist's cultural contributions, then does focusing on this kind of collaborative work offer any benefits or insights that a focus on individual work might not?

MF: Well, I guess it depends on the individual or the group and their work. Collectives are the trend du jour for many curators right now and the wider exposure of collaborative work makes it easy for casual viewers to get lazy, conflate things, and operate under the false assumption that all these artist groups have similar concerns and values. It doesn't take a lot of research to see that this is clearly untrue. There is a lot of diversity. And in talking about social structures, groups can't always be excluded from the same irritating behavior normally ascribed to a lot of individual art stars – the same shitty desire for competition, staking claims of novelty, and pulling stupid PR stunts is still evident. If everything else remains diseased, collaboration alone isn't going to cure a whole lot.

SR: I agree with you that collaborative groups and collectives being lumped and categorized together is irresponsible on the part of curators and writers who quickly and generically summarize such diverse practices, and then use these shorthand versions to fill their existing agendas of being on top of current trends in art. Though since many artist groups encourage this, it's not difficult to see how this conflation can happen without being seriously challenged.

This historically lazy compartmentalizing should be challenged. But we shouldn't allow recent trends to distract from continuing to discuss group activity in a more productive way.

Practically, I'd still suggest that collaboration in tandem with a politically motivated practice (even if not overtly political in subject matter) might at least get a little of the bullshit out of the way for artists to develop more progressive strategies. Partly because more people can get more done. But also because working in groups still has an element of danger for the more commercial side of art, and for some of art's implicit roles in a broader political context. I'm suggesting that artists in particular are a special case, because as a vocational group they are used to justify those claims that various first-world countries, especially the US, do in fact support autonomy and individual freedom. So while there are many reasons for collaboration in art, I'm suggesting that one of them may be to pose a challenge to our implicit role as artists in supporting master narratives about individual subjecthood, especially as these help maintain some of our dominant structures.

MF: The desire to question dominant structures has to come from a lot of places. One good thing I've seen is that most exhibition organizers seem to expect that collaboratives might want to include extra people in their project proposals. So when Temporary Services gets an invitation to be in a show, we have often been able to get a bunch of other artists included as well by proposing projects where we collaborate with them on something new, or devise a structure that contains the work of others. And we insist that our collaborators get properly credited (doesn't always happen, unfortunately). Many times the artists and creative people that work with us would have a much harder time getting opportunities on their own – sometimes because they are younger, but also

because they are in prison or are homeless and are working from a place of extreme marginalization.

Part of why I thought talking about multi-tasking would be productive here is because developing lots of skills and taking the reins of so many tasks gives people a means to develop their own platforms for how viewers encounter their art and ideas. It is empowering to be able to multi-task. I find almost all commercial galleries to be unacceptable venues for my work, so I felt I had no choice but to develop new skills. To come back to the underground music scene again – there are some good models there. I'm thinking of people like The Ex, Sonic Youth and Fugazi. They are all bands so it's a given that they collaborate; that in and of itself isn't special. What's inspiring are all of the other tasks they take on – as a band but also as individuals. All of those bands do things like put out their own records and other people's; the members split off and play with musicians outside the group, they write, they publish books, some of them organize their own tours, etc. The Ex, in particular, are immensely inspiring in this way.

It's exciting to have a diverse creative life with many problems to solve and tasks to juggle and to have that be integrated with making things and sharing them with others. What's perhaps dangerous to the commercial art world is showing that you don't really need it – and that it's possible to show in museums, or non-commercial galleries at universities, or get the press to write about you, without having to rely on a commercial gallery to act as a middleman. There are lots of exhibition organizers who are very happy not to deal with galleries – they like dealing with living artists directly and inviting people to make new work if they want, rather than going shopping for what's available from a local collector or from a sheet of slides of loan works offered by a gallery. And it's interesting to swing back and forth and all over the place and use all kinds of venues to present your work. And if no one wants to show what you make, you can always create your own spaces – by any means necessary!

Additional information: a different dialogue between Scott and Marc titled "BASEKAMP – A Philadelphia Experiment" can be found in the journal *Disconnect*. Visit www.red76.com for details. Scott Rigby can be held accountable at scottrigby@hotmail.com. Information on his work with BASEKAMP is at www.basekamp.com. Marc Fischer can be held accountable at marcf@core.com. Information on Temporary Services is at www.temporarieservices.org.