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PLURAL IDENTITIES AND COLLECTIVE AUTHORSHIP: GROUP EXPERIENCES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

abstract

This paper intends to provide some historical and philosophical insights to reflect upon the enduring impact of group experiences which, since the post-war period, have constituted an important peculiarity in the landscape of contemporary arts. We will reconstruct some of the reasons that have led artists to seek new paths of subjectivation through collective creation: moving across the technological experimentation of the groups of the 1960s, the political militancy of the collectives of the 1970s, the format of the artistic acronym of the 1980s and the new possibilities opened up by the Net in the 1990s, we will retrace the deconstruction of the romantic mythology of the author, as it has traditionally been consolidated. By emphasizing shared creative processes, these practices propose innovative models of identity and subjectivity that transcend individual boundaries and reflect the complex interplay of technology, politics, and social interaction in contemporary art.

keywords

plural artist, artistic collectives, contemporary art, identity, authorship

1. Introduction: The Plural Artist

This contribution aims to propose some insights, without any claim to exhaustiveness, on group experiences that, through collaborative and horizontal artistic practices, have dismantled the traditional notion of authorship. Forms of collective artistic identities have indeed allowed contemporary art to act as a catalyst for new processes of subjectivation, triggering broader debates on the conventions that have historically shaped our conception of identity. The framework informing this article draws on a theoretical paradigm borrowed from the humanities and social sciences, which, over the 20th century, disavowed the idea of a presumed naturalness of identity. While the traditional “ontological perspective” conceives identity as fixed, metaphysically guaranteed, and independent of human action, the “sociological perspective” considers identity as fluid, shaped by social recognition, negotiation, and competition: in the first case, identity can just be discovered and contemplated, in the second, it is instead continually invented, constructed, and redefined in the social arena (Remotti, 2010).

Not only several collaborative experiments have recognized the underlying material and authorial co-dependence in an artistic project, but there are also significant groups that have made this recognition an explicit and meaningful poetic hallmark. We will use the notion of “plural artist” (Balzola & Rosa, 2011) to talk about a constellation of possibilities connected by the choice to create a single authorial device, a unique “artistic identity” starting from the coexistence of many individualities; we will use some instances put forward by what Argan termed the “reasons of the group” (Argan, 1963) to question how a certain articulation of artistic practice can provide practical and imaginative tools for conceiving a plural identity. Furthermore, we will examine how collective creation can delineate new models of subjectivity that challenge the consumer-oriented subjectivity promoted by the neoliberal order, which tends towards a privatized conception of material and immaterial resources.

The desire to explore these issues stems from an observation: in the last decade, there has been a growing interest in artistic collectives, increasingly enhanced by innovative curatorial proposals and highlighted within important institutional spaces. Plural artists have recently been entrusted with the curatorship of some of the most prestigious international exhibitions in Europe, such as the 2016 Berlin Biennale, curated by the New York collective DIS¹, or

¹ The group is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach to advertising, fashion, communication, and popular culture via the Internet: born in 2010 from a virtual and interactive magazine, it has over time proposed cross-media

Documenta Fifteen, curated in 2022 by the Indonesian collective ruangrupa². Plural artists have been awarded prestigious honors such as the Turner Prize, organized by the Tate Gallery and reserved for young British artists: in 2021, the shortlist of finalists consisted exclusively of collectives – Array Collective, Black Obsidian Sound System, Cooking Sections, Gentle/Radical, and Project Art Works; the award was given to Array Collective, which works to create collective actions in response to socio-political issues impacting Northern Ireland. In 2024, on the occasion of the 60th International Art Exhibition in Venice, Mataaho Collective won the Golden Lion as best participant; the title of the Biennale itself, *Foreigners Everywhere*, was inspired by a series of works produced by a plural artist, composed of Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill, which speaks of herself in the singular and identifies as Claire Fontaine: born in 2004 in Paris, two years later she releases an “announcement” to the public of the French television broadcast *Ce soir (ou jamais!)*. In presenting herself, she writes:

Claire Fontaine is a groupuscule made up of groupuscules, because each one of us is already several in themselves. We work under a pseudonym because our bodies are not the bodies of the authors of this work, they are the receptacles of collective ideas and of the political problems that traverse us, but we are not just couriers. We collaborate and participate. We don't direct anything [...]. We are like you: whatever singularities caught in the cogs of global capitalist misery. The only thing that differentiates us is the fact that the general deafness haunts us day and night like a buzzing in our ears at a painful frequency. (Fontaine, 2020, pp. 75-76)

The growing visibility that artistic group projects enjoy today suggests that the legacy of past collective experiences has been recognized and assimilated, and that the individual's choice to found themselves in the plural subject has delineated new possible identities worth analysing.

With the historical avant-gardes of the first decades of the twentieth century, an enhancement of group work has emerged within the production and contemporary art criticism, reaching its peak in the years following the Second World War. The development of consumer society set the stage for a proliferation of artistic groups, showing how artistic practice was perceived as a potential field of resistance against the alienating logic of massification and cultural homogenization. On this point, the reflection proposed by Argan (1963) in the above-mentioned article is paradigmatic. He states: “Whoever wants to defend the free activity of the individual from the torpid and lethal inertia of the mass must reflect, first of all, that the

**2. 1960s
and 1970s:
Plural Identities
Between
Technological
Experimentation
and Political
Militancy**

and cross-platform interventions both online and offline, supporting new creative practices. DIS's virtual community remains active online, pursuing the goals that have animated the project from the beginning: “We started dis.art with the idea that complex thinking about politically challenging issues might be better served through entertainment than academic papers [...]. Rather than compete for clicks and ad revenue on YouTube, we distribute directly to individuals as well as libraries, universities, and art institutions. We aim to foster a solution-driven community, and like you, our desire is to rethink the way social, political, and economic structures operate, and to imagine generative blueprints outside of dominant narratives. The future demands not just our expertly honed skills in watching, but also imagining and understanding” in <https://dis.art/> (accessed on 05/06/2024).

2 Although the artistic direction of Documenta was entrusted to a core group of ten members, the total number of actual members of ruangrupa is not fixed. The official communication related to the exhibition was handled by the street newspaper Asphalt, sold by homeless people in the cities of Kassel, Göttingen, and Hanover. The first statements disseminated in the press materials outlined the centrality of the concept of *lumbung* (“communal rice barn”), which for the entire duration of the exhibition served as a theoretical and operational paradigm for creating relationships among all the involved realities. For more information see <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung/> (accessed on 05/06/2024). Some of the most interesting publications about the ruangrupa curatorial practice are included in Kolb & Richter, 2022.

fundamental quality of the human person is the capacity, the will, to put oneself in common, to associate with others for a common purpose, to coordinate one's actions with others, to form a group" (Argan, 1963).

During the 1960s, as aesthetic sensibility gradually shifted its focus from fixed forms to movement (the work is no longer *a thing*, but *a field of events*), from passive contemplation to active spectatorship, from static enjoyment to a broader phenomenology of perception, a constellation of collective projects spreads worldwide. From the second half of the 1950s to the first half of the 1960s in Italy we witness the birth of Gruppo T and MID in Milan, Gruppo N in Padua, Gruppo Uno in Rome, Gruppo ATOMA in Livorno, Gruppo 63 in Palermo, Gruppo Tempo 3 in Genoa, and Gruppo V in Rimini; in France, there is the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuelle and Equipo 57, formed by Spanish artists in exile during the Franco dictatorship; in Germany, Gruppo Zero; in Munich, Gruppo 47; in the Netherlands, Gruppo Nul; in Moscow, Dvijzenije; in Cleveland, the Anonima Group; and in Osaka, the Gutai Group³.

The desire to form a group responds, on one hand, to a certain dissatisfaction with an art market traditionally based on great personalities embodying a certain "style", and on the other, to the need to rethink collectively the position of artistic practice within the technological horizon emerging from the economic boom, and within the pervasiveness of technique that defines new lifestyles⁴. It is no coincidence that many collectives born in this period are characterized by a strong techno-experimental inclination and interest in what would be defined as kinetic art or arte programmata: the aesthetic object is based on a computational program that allows for formal, chromatic, and perceptual variation of the space and the visual sequences therein, playing on repetitions, variations, and random events.

From this perspective, since 1961, the history of several groups intertwines around the periodic exhibitions of Nove Tendencije (New Tendencies), an international organization managed by some artists based in Zagreb, around which the avant-gardes related to kinetic art gather. Returning to the memory of that experience on the occasion of an exhibition in 2013, the artist Getulio Alviani elaborates a reflection that can serve as an a posteriori manifesto for the theoretical atmosphere in which NT's eight years of activities unfolded:

The New Tendencies was a very innovative system in everything:
non-cult of personality (sometimes even anonymity)
non protagonism
not commercialization
not private galleries (but only cultural institutions)
not elitist art
not fetishism
not unique artwork (but only the beginning of multiples for a social purpose)
not interpretation
not metaphor
not mystification
not strategy
not... (Alviani, 2013, p. 19)

³ For a more specific overview of some of these groups (with a particular focus on Italian experiences), see Meloni, 2020.

⁴ In this context, it is again Argan (1961) who lucidly emphasizes, in the introduction to the catalogue of the 12th Lissone Prize in 1961, that "the task of contemporary art is not to preserve at all costs the values improperly called 'humanistic' in a society that becomes increasingly technocratic, but to determine what will be, in the historical figure of modern culture, the place and function of aesthetic activity" (p. 13).

Many people around NT prefer to refer to themselves as “operators” rather than “artists”. The typical openness of the 1960s toward the epistemological horizons opened up by new electronic technologies and early forms of automation influences the growing deconstruction of the artist as a single authorial source, considering that the creative use of technologies imposes teamwork among different technical expertise to achieve an artistic result.

This point would be crucial for the new challenges posed three decades later by the integration of virtual reality into aesthetic practice, as attested by the document *For a New Cartography of the Real*, drafted by some Italian scholars in 1993 and conceived as a preliminary draft for the elaboration of a *Manifesto of Art and Communication in the Virtual Age*, among whose founding themes is “Collective Author: new technologies re-launch the possibility and necessity of a collective artistic process”. The need to conceive the collective authorship is thus argued:

The figure of the single artist as the single architect of the artistic process, alpha and omega of the value of the work, the unique repository of the paths of meaning, is transformed. The author is born as a connected, expanded individual, a neuron that receives, activates, translates, interprets, and retransmits information in continuous connection with other entities. It is the driving element of the artistic-communicative process, which is defined in the unceasing interaction between co-authors, disciplines, technologies, and users⁵.

The use of technology re-launches the need to broaden the meshes of artistic authorship, conceiving new rhizomatic forms of collaboration within single authorial devices: if it is difficult to transmit, at the level of common imagination, the complex interaction between the various parts of a single artistic organism, it is also due to the absence of appropriate semantic nuances in our language. As Claire Bishop (2012) clearly points out, while “the worlds of music, film, literature, fashion, and theatre have a rich vocabulary to describe co-existing authorial positions (director, author, performer, editor, producer, casting agent, sound engineer, stylist, photographer), all of which are regarded as essential to the creative realization of a given project” (p. 9), the world of visual arts lacks an analogous lexical variety.

With the 1970s, collective configurations took on a militant and activist character, riding the wave of the 1968 protests – partly converged into the Movement of '77. Simplifying, a clear line of distinction can be drawn between the group of the 1960s, a closed formation structured around the programmatic intentions of few artists, operating within the canonical “spaces of art”, and the collective of the 1970s, an open platform that embraces the demands of political collectives and acts practices of disorientation, counter-information, and urban reappropriation, favouring actions in public space or self-managed places. In the self-narratives of the protagonists of these experiences, artists figure as “aesthetic operators”. As noted by Enrico Crispolti (1977),

the cultural operator, and the aesthetic operator in particular, in our case, is no longer in possession of a good to participate, to dispense; he is no longer a unilateral operator of culture, he does not, in short, impose his lesson, his action or his subjects: he is instead only a solicitor, provocateur, in a certain sense, of participation, and precisely of a participation that represents a moment of others’ self-knowing growth; a participation in which the process (and possibly even the object) of aesthetic

⁵ The text is fully quoted in Verde, 2007.

operativity is realized, overcoming the antithesis between creation (and research) and mediation. (p. 18)

It is inevitable to associate the maturation of this perspective with an atmosphere politically marked by strong decentralizing pushes and efforts for grassroots social participation, pursuing the systems of co-dependence most functional to the struggle. In those years, among the diverse range of extra-parliamentary political groups, the term *collective* occupied a prominent place: political collectives, self-consciousness collectives, feminist collectives emerged to represent distinct movements within broader organisational contexts.

One of the most renowned declarations of the Autonomous Collective of Painters of Porta Ticinese, formed in Milan in 1973, serves as a representative example: “The collective works against the capitalist organization of the State of labour and exploitation, rejecting the privileges of ‘autonomy of the culture’ and proposes as a group of militant operators the visualization of the contents of and the socialization of creative tools, recognizing that culture is that expressed by advanced struggles conducted by the proletariat” (Crispoliti & De Grada, 1976).

The mobilization for a fairer world creates “impure identities” (many processes of subjectivation are as political as artistic, as social as cultural), in the name of an expanded and interdisciplinary creativity that seems to flesh out a *diffuse intellectuality*. Toni Negri (2014) appropriately captures the constructive drive that the 1970s made following the deconstructions of the 1960s: “From deconstruction our work consequently proceeds toward a collective process of self-valorization, of constructing circuits of value and signification completely autonomous, completely free from the market, definitively aware of the independence of desire” (p. 42).

3. 1980s and 1990s: Expanded Identities Through Artistic Acronyms and Innovations of the Net

Consistent with the overall climate of “reflux” that characterizes the 1980s, the artistic practices of the period stand out for a recovery of individual subjective dimension and a reappropriation of traditional languages⁶ (such as painting), fundamentally rejecting the conception of art as a tool for political protest. To summarize with Lyotard (1982), “in the multifarious calls to suspend artistic experimentation, there is the same appeal to order, a desire for unity, identity, security, popularity [...]. There is an undeniable sign of this common disposition: the fact that for all these authors nothing is more urgent than settling the legacies of the avant-gardes” (p. 9).

Without going into specifics of the Postmodern debate⁷, which has articulated the many shades and the intricated layers of the issue, I will limit myself here to pointing out how collective artistic experimentation suffered a setback at the dawn of a new decade, which was eager to move beyond the great ideological fervors of the previous one. Although they represent an exception to the widespread cultural atmosphere and often constitute themselves on the wave of imprinting left by previous militances, some significant collective projects took shape in the 1980s. Foremost, among these, I mention the Studio Azzurro group – born in Milan in 1982 on the initiative of Paolo Rosa, Fabio Cirifino, and Leonardo Sangiorgi – because one of its founders, Paolo Rosa, articulated the notion of the “plural artist” that I have used in this article. The operational and theoretical framework in which Studio Azzurro’s plural practice developed originates from a close relationship with complex multimedia languages that necessarily required different creative skills and energies,

6 For a critical survey on the subject, see Buchloh, 1981.

7 For more in-depth coordinates, see Bauman, 1997; Harvey, 1991; Lyotard, 1984.

honoured by their collective signature⁸. “I must confront myself with a collective name, a collaborative practice that is that of Studio Azzurro”, states Rosa (2017): “We have always argued, in these almost thirty years of our history, that it was right to put this nickname before the different roles, to express a creative climate indebted to many and diversified contributions” (p. 132). The Studio, aiming at the production of behaviors rather than things with which to suffocate a world already saturated with materiality, has over time developed researches on interactivity that in a certain sense extend the author’s faculties to a spectator who has become a *spect-actor*, an active part of the work.

The trend of “return to order” after the easing of tensions that had swept the world from the mid-1960s certainly does not correspond to the recomposition of a presumed “lost identity”, or a rediscovered individuality after the decline of the collectivist myth. The development of unbridled neoliberalism generates new forms of biopower from which the critical consciousness of many artists wants to disengage, while the crisis of the industrial Fordist paradigm opens up unprecedented scenarios that require the elaboration of new interpretive tools: creativity is increasingly subsumed within mechanisms of commodification, profit accumulation shifts from material to immaterial production, and precarity emerges as a generalized, structural, and existential condition – all elements that would later define the cognitive capitalism in which we still live today⁹. If forms of antagonism may survive, the pattern of conflict between big ideological blocs does not work anymore. Once again, the creation of collective artistic subjects provides insights for symbolic micro-subversions that challenge paradigms in the process of consolidation: it is the case of projects that do not present themselves as ‘groups’ or ‘collectives’, but rather as brands, commercial acronyms, or firms. Are born this way Group Material, General Idea, International Corporation, Information Fiction Publicité, Premiata Ditta, Banca di Oklahoma¹⁰, whose critical appropriation of corporate aesthetics, advertising imaginary, and financial structures expose the underlying mechanisms of consumer culture.

Just to name a few examples, in 1983 Group Material proposed the project *Subculture*, in the form of an intervention in New York’s subway system, in which the collective replaced the usual commercial advertisements inside subway trains with its own political and socially charged messages, using the same marketing language; meanwhile, in Canada, General Idea adopted a similar strategy with *FILE Magazine*, a satirical publication that mimicked the format of LIFE Magazine. Through this parody, which costed the artists a copyright infringement lawsuit, the collective highlighted how visual language and editorial structures shape public perception, and produce the commodification of culture. In Italy, the Bank of Oklahoma established itself as a fictional financial institution which produced banknotes, checks, and official-looking documents, parodying the growing dominance of financial markets and questioning the arbitrary nature of economic value.

The rhetoric of advanced capitalism and the language of marketing, increasingly pervasive due to the irreversible hyper-mediatization of the world, is replicated in a way that, beneath the sometimes parodic appearance, conveys a profound disquiet. The collective name here is not so much a space of common struggle as a force of depersonalization, reflecting the adaptation of creativity to the motor that regulates the world: the commodity. The individual finds their purpose in the collective, in the sense that identity appears to be

8 Think about the *sensitive environments* that the group has been proposing since ‘95. For further information, see Valentini, 2017; Mattei, 1999.

9 For an overview from a technical perspective, see Vercellone, 2006. For a political perspective, see Virno, 2002.

10 It is interesting to point out the presence, although I will not dwell on this, of projects carried out by individual artists that go in the same direction: to cite an example, the famous Ingold Airlines founded by the artist Res Ingold.

shaped by impersonal forces such as finance, globalization, and technology. By mimicking the production mechanisms prevailing in society as a whole, the international phenomenon of acronym-artists problematizes the order of values and behavioral patterns that, more or less consciously, inform our approach to consumer goods.

Emblematic are the considerations shared by the group BrigataEs, formed in Naples in 1992, in an interview with Silvia Bordini: after defining themselves as “homeless identities” and describing their work as a “self-mocking chronicle of an experience and at the same time the metaphor of a more general condition of change” (BrigataEs, 2002, p. 27), the group declares itself linked to an “aesthetic operation that, while ludically and critically underlining the loss of status of the contemporary artist, encourages the ‘citizen’ to recognize his own disidentity. The masked images thus become a sort of multiple mirrors that reflect the anonymity of the user” (p. 35). Even more programmatic is their statement:

We aim for the recognition of those who show new possibilities of thinking, seeing, communicating. This is why we prefer to define ourselves as aesthetic operators and have chosen to present ourselves as a brand, an acronym. Our productions are not artworks but means of communication. Our target audience – which in part already exists but is mainly to be created – consists of ‘aesthetic conscience objectors’. (p. 26)

Starting from the 1990s, with the evolution of the media society and especially with the advent of the Internet, the framework becomes more complex: while, on one hand, the Net represents a form of dispersion and dematerialization of resources, on the other hand, it serves as a laboratory for a new visual culture, offering spaces of interconnection between knowledges and disciplines, as well as new and extended possibilities for relationships. Expanded, multiple, fluid identities take shape within the Internet, imposing a rethinking of authorial logic itself, given that “communication as a directional transmission of information-culture from an ‘author’ to a ‘user’ no longer exists, having been dispersed in a network in which it is substantially impossible to trace all the channels (the pathway) and trace it back to a specific subject-author” (Pietroiusti, 1997, pp. 12-13). In taking charge of this undeniable reality, different forms of virtual communities¹¹ take root in a way that would have been unthinkable until recently, and that only partially find analogues in physical groups formed outside the Net. Various practices of dissemination and deterritorialization also include ecosystems that challenge the assumptions of the contemporary socio-political status through hacking, parasitism, and clandestinity, according to a sensibility that recalls the “activist” militancy of the 1970s. Informal collectives arise from the grassroots using the Net as a free and anonymous space to pursue actions of displacement, “nuclei (cells) offering a magmatic matter in continuous dissipation (prodigality) and dispersion (dissemination)” (Perretta, 2002, p. 14): to name a few, think about Karen Eliot, Yomango, RTMark, etoy.com, The Yes Men, Las Agencias, Luther Blissett Project. The latter (which became Wu Ming in 2000) is one of the examples that gained visibility even in more mainstream circuits, even though the radical nature of its proposal has generated considerable scandals. In its 1995 manifesto, the group proclaimed:

Capitalism dominates things and people by describing them: ‘You are an I’. ‘No, I no longer want to be an I, I want to be infinite Is!’. The collective name destroys the control mechanisms of bourgeois logic. Without the possibility of classification, power cannot

¹¹ For further exploration, see Terranova, 2022.

impose pre-cooked and pre-digested identities, nor operate to pit them against each other. (Luther Blissett, 1995)¹²

To conclude, it is useful to evoke some insights that Nicolas Bourriaud, curator, critic, and theorist of the so-called *Relational Aesthetics*, draws from the grafting of Felix Guattari's thought into the contemporary art field. The toolbox that the French psychoanalyst and philosopher provides to posterity primarily aims to denaturalize subjectivity, understood as a complex and not always pacified set of "plates", "planes", "machinery"¹³, whose nature is not only individual, but also social and political. Paraphrasing Guattari, Bourriaud (2002) states that art

is defined as a process of non-verbal semiotization, not as a separate category of global production [...]. The end purpose of subjectivity is nothing other than an individuation still to be won. Artistic practice forms a special terrain for this individuation, providing potential models for human existence in general [...]. There is nothing less natural than subjectivity. There is also nothing more constructed, formulated and worked on. (p. 88)¹⁴

Identity, far from being a natural attribute of the subject or an ontological *prius* to cling to, is thus a project to be imagined and constructed within vectors that transcend individual boundaries. Plural artistic practice, as a platform for the production of subjectivation, transposes onto the plane of authorship (and therefore makes explicit) the tensions with which each person constitutively negotiates the construction of his own identity: with technologies, with communication machines, with politics, with the social and intersubjective fabric in which one operates.

The fetishization of the author-demiurge and the romantic myth of creation, described by Roman filmmaker Anna Lajolo as "aggressive, authoritarian, vampiric", fade in favour of valuing the sharing flows that underlie every production process. Challenging a system that brands great personalities according to market demand, in which the signature of the individual author acts as "behavioural homogenization and reification" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 94), the phenomenology of artistic groups, as it has taken shape since the second half of the 20th century, operationally restores the complexity of contemporary authorial identity. It rejects both the mythology of genius and the "death of the author" proclaimed by structuralists, instead proposing an idea of the artist as an "operator of meaning", who cultivates fertile ground for new phenomena of subjectivation while recognizing a multi-level interdependence: quoting Negri (2014), "art, as we have said, lives on production. Production lives on the collective" (p. 44).

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12 For in-depth studies and bibliographic materials on Luther Blissett, see https://www.lutherblissett.net/index_en.html (accessed on 12/06/2024).

13 On the imaginative language of Guattari, whose words often territorialize into images, see Bourriaud, 2002, pp. 86-87.

14 The text continues: "Guattari's contribution to aesthetics would be incomprehensible if we did not underline his effort to de-naturalize and deterritorialize subjectivity, expel it from his earmarked domain, the sacrosanct subject, and tackle the disconcerting shores with their proliferation of mechanistic devices and existential territories in the process of being formed [...]. We must thus learn to 'seize, enhance and reinvent' subjectivity, for otherwise we shall see it transformed into a rigid apparatus at the exclusive service of the powers that be" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 89).

4. Conclusions

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Links

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