

Review: The Hive, San Juan Polygraphic Triennial

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The third edition of the San Juan Polygraphic Triennial, celebrated in Puerto Rico from April to August 2012, exhibited the works of several artist groups and individual artists from Latin America and the United States. The artworks were exhibited at the three main venues: *Galería Nacional*, *Casa Blanca* and *Arsenal de la Marina*. At the *Casa de los contrafuertes*, a group of local artists showed works in homage to the Triennial. The curators of the show, Deborah Cullen (New York), Antonio Bessa (Brazil), Úrsula Dávila Villa (México) and Rebeca Noriega (Puerto Rico), designed the exhibition layout and agreed upon the central theme of the Triennial: collaborative art practices.

The metaphor of the hive, the main motif for this year's edition, is both poetic and polemical. Collaboration has been one of the main strategies used by groups involved in the social and political uprisings in places like the Middle East, Spain, Greece and the United States between 2010 and 2012. Protesting against the powers that have provoked the current political and economic crisis, these collective urban demonstrations seem to echo the political demonstrations of the 1960s organized against the Vietnam War and in favor of civil rights in the United States and elsewhere. In the realm of the arts, collaborative practices are represented by a wide range of modalities that not only constitute political activism or urban interventions. They can also result in the creation of individual artworks as well as the inclusion of audiences in the process of artistic production.

While the film and music industry are traditionally characterized by collaboration, the field of visual arts has historically enthroned the artist and the unique artwork. Nonetheless, many examples can be cited as efforts of collaborative work and of its different modalities in the history of art. In the 19th century some avant-garde groups formed artists' colonies

such as that of Pont-Aven (France), which included groups like the Synthetists who were in search of a new expressive vocabulary. Other examples are: The Arts and Crafts Movement (England), The Four (Scotland) or the Bauhaus (Germany). These groups were united in the creation of the total work of art. Avant-garde movements, like Dada, engaged in multimedia practices and collaborative art production. The Situationists employed such strategies in order to criticize mass media and the commodification of art. Moreover, Fluxus organized the so-called "Fluxfests" that made use of collaborative art practices. The criticism of these groups was directed mainly at the dependency of artists on the museum and the art market as legitimating structures.

While these examples give ample evidence of collective art practices in the history of art, their number pale in comparison to the general trend of enthroning the single artist and the individual work of art in the art historical discourse. According to Deborah Cullen, one of the curators of this year's Triennial, the reason for this preponderance is that "art history, in general, has underestimated the collaborative experience."¹ It seems to me that it is not a problem of underestimating the collaborative art experience, but understanding the role of art history in the complex and slow social process that started at the end of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. During this period more recognition was given to the efforts of commentators and early art historians in elevating the individual artist's rank among the scholars (*literati*) of the time. This was also the time when the artist's craft, and the pursuit of the useful and the beautiful were valued as important as the activity of humanists, businessmen and explorers of the New World.

One could say that early commentators, such as Leon Battista Alberti, were instrumental in highlighting and elevating the craft of artists from the collective practices of the Middle Ages, that equaled painters and sculptors to masons and apothecaries, to a new position among the liberal arts; one

¹ Deborah Cullen, "Contact Zones. Places, Spaces and other Test Cases", in *El Panal/The Hive. 3ra Trienal Poli/gráfica de San Juan*, ed. Deborah Cullen et al., (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 2012), 22.

that was considered appropriate for humanists and well-to-do men. These commentators were also instrumental in establishing the relationship between, for example, the knowledge of painters and architects with that of mathematicians by showing their reliance on geometry and mathematics in the use of linear scientific perspective.

The encumbrance of the single artist is also related to a new conception of man in humanism. Pico della Mirandola had a profound influence on the arts helping to elevate the artist from the position of artisan to that of a genius. In his treatise, *On the Dignity of Man* (1486), della Mirandola expounds that man is able to exercise his intellectual capacities through his free will, thus transforming himself and ascending to the realm of angels.

According to André Chastel, when Dante mentions Giotto and Cimabue in *Purgatory IX* of the *Divine Comedy* (1308-1321), his topic was not the glorification of figurative art or the artist. Dante was expounding on the vices of pride and vanity. He mentions these two painters as examples of humble but notorious artists of his time. Although his commentary had important consequences in the art historical discourse in the following century, he focused on the personality of a man like Giotto, a humble artist who was able to ascend to glory. Social commentators and men of letters were at first surprised that Dante would compare painters to poets. Chastel adds that artists began to sign their works; a gesture not favored by clerics and intellectuals who thought it was a sign of pride and a way to gain fame by showing their signatures in sanctuaries. Writers, on the other hand, could only achieve fame through exceptional means.² This illustrates that artists were not seen as equal to writers. Although, at first, it was not a matter of achieving social status, it later became a way of gaining recognition in the field.

² André Chastel, "El artista", en *El hombre del Renacimiento*, ed. Eugenio Garín, (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1999), 253-254.

Gradually, the artist became viewed as a solitary figure and God's gift to the world as in the portrait described by Giorgio Vasari in his seminal book *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times* (1550). Vasari argued in favor of elevating the status of artists as Filippo Villani had done before by including artists among the illustrious citizens of Florence in his book *Liber de origine civitatis Florentiae et eiusdem famosis civibus* (1395).³ Vasari explains that painters had to study linear scientific perspective and were as knowledgeable as those who studied liberal arts.⁴ As the artist's rank among intellectuals was elevated it also helped to increase his participation in literary and humanistic circles and raised his status in society. Vasari highlighted the virtues that characterized each of the artists he wrote about: knowledge and skill. These virtues defined a man of superior standing and facilitated the progress of art.

In the context of Modern European society, the gradual shift from a focus on the community to that centered on the individual is also intertwined with the rise of capitalism as an economic system that emphasized private property and the individual as holder of legal rights. Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham advocated individualism and, like many other Enlightenment thinkers, believed that individual freedom and free economy leads to an ideal society. A brief survey of the history of art gives us more clues as to why the individual, and not the group, has been the focus of most research in art history.

In the 19th century these ideas became the foundation of the Romantic idea of the creative genius or visionary engaged in an internal creative process that only he could understand. In modernity, the institution of art was the most ardent and eloquent defender of the artist genius arguing its centrality as the main guarantor of the artwork's profitability and uniqueness. As artists grew less dependent on church and state, they

³ Karel Van Mander followed Vasari's footsteps in *Painting Book* (1604).

⁴ Similarly, Cennino Cennini stated in his *Libro dell'arte* (15th century) that the artist's *disegno* comes from the intellect. In his book, *Della Pittura* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti gave reasons for the study of painting and also addressed the issue of knowledge in art.

clung to the art market and the support of bourgeois sponsors, who reaffirmed the single artist's status in a competitive economic system that gained profit by selling individually signed rather than anonymous artworks.

Individuality was also vehemently affirmed in the passage from modernity to postmodernity. French sociologist and philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky, explains that the new social process –*personalization*– was forged at that time. The process of *personalization* is conceived as the cult object of contemporary capitalist society.⁵ One could say that the artist is the paradigm of the free individual immersed in total subjectivity. The artist, not the group, is enthroned by a society that adheres to the values of liberty, equality and wellbeing; values that have been part of bourgeois ideology since the 18th century and were later fully assumed by the capitalist market.

The work of art, an object or an event, is innovative because it is the product of a creative mind that derives inspiration from personal experience and not from a collective one. These are some of the reasons why the single artist and not the group have gained recognition not only by the art institution and the market but also in the art historical discourse. It is worth pointing out that in the catalogue of the Triennial, the art historical discourse is characterized by the tendency to highlight the leader, organizer or founder of groups or projects, such as Robert Blackburn of the Printmaking Workshop in New York.

As previously mentioned, the hive serves as a metaphor for collective practices in the Triennial. The hive, the work of the queen bee and the bee workers represent a process in nature by which an anonymous product is created. The most radicalized version of collective practices subsumes the efforts of anonymous creators or workers and submits the origin of the product to obscurity. This would be antithetical to the process of

⁵ Gilles Lipovetsky, *La era del vacío. Ensayos sobre el individualismo contemporáneo*, (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1986), 6-7.

personalization and to the logic of the art market today. Relatively close to this modality is that in which the collective practice is recognized by the name of a group. Some examples in the show are: *Atarraya Cartonera* (Fig. 1), *Equis* (Fig. 2), *MSA*, *Conboca*, *Exit Art* and *Área*.



Fig.1 *Atarraya Cartonera, Xerographics for a counter-neoliberal aesthetics, 2012*

The metaphor of the hive has also been used in science fiction. The case in point is the fictional entity called the Borg in the television show *Star Trek*. The Borg, a malevolent and threatening symbol to individuality, is an extreme case and negative version of collective practice. It stands for the subjugated person without will and individual creativity. One could also think of a hive or collective in which private property is suppressed and all gains are shared by its members. This would certainly be the most threatening practice in capitalist society since competition would be minimized and the individual's economic aspirations would be superseded by those of the group. A hive like this would not contemplate the promotion or singling out of an individual artist or producer and the profit of the works would have to be shared by the collective.

The theme of collaboration comes at a momentous time in the country's history when solidarity is lacking and society faces serious social, political and economic problems. Collaboration, not only among artists and groups but also among citizens, would seem a logical strategy for solving many contemporary problems. Nonetheless, the efforts of the curators to address collaborative practices by means of artistic endeavors do not explicitly make the public conscious of collaborative work and strategies, nor do they seem to aspire to show how this could be possible.



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Fig.2 Equis, *Hate Barricades? Now Hiring*, 2010

The curators of the show seem to have emphasized two criteria for the selection and organization of the works shown. The first is the avant-garde profile of some of the works, particularly those shown in the Arsenal de la Puntilla and Casa Blanca. The second criterion is the work's historical importance. History orients the selection at the Galería Nacional, a venue dedicated mostly to the "maestros" of printmaking. Less informed guests might be confused by the criteria followed for the selection and order of the artworks. In my view, the Triennial is not very effective in stressing the activity of collaboration when in some of the venues it places more emphasis on the artworks and/or events by well-known artists.

One can appreciate different variations of collaborative art practices in the Triennial. The most represented modality is the work of art signed by the artist but produced through conceptual and technical exchanges in a space shared by various artists. Some excellent examples of this are the Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, the División de Educación de la Comunidad, the New York Graphic Workshop, Siqueiros Experimental Workshop and the Harlem Community Art Center.



Fig.3 Omar Obdulio Peña Forty, *Herramientas/Atelier Intercambio*, 2012

Collaborative art practices have changed since the uprisings of 1968 in, for example, Paris and Mexico City. Nikos Papastergiadis comments on Will Bradley's account in *Art and Social Change* (2007) regarding the shift in artistic practices after the relative failure of the Left to achieve social transformation. According to Bradley, the aim of the new social movements after 1968 is to do away with hierarchical relations and to embody and realize temporal emancipatory forms.⁶ I believe some of the workshops included in the Triennial stem from this new conception of collaboration where the viewer's role is equaled to that of the artist. Artist

⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis, "The Global Need for Collaboration", *Conversations on Collaborative Arts Practice*, 2008. <http://collabarts.org/?p=201>

and viewer literally exchange roles as in the case of *Intercambio* by Antonio Vega Macotela. The artist traded favors in exchange of works of art created by inmates in a Mexican prison. Similar to the practice of Macotela is that of Omar Obdulio Peña Forty in his work entitled *Herramientas / Atelier Intercambio* (Fig. 3), in which he cut the hair of visitors and invited them to cut their own following his designs exhibited during the show. This barber shop constituted a space to mingle and exchange roles.

Within the context of the Triennial, collaborative practice is also exemplified by an artist asking for the help of experts in a technique or field of knowledge necessary for the creation of a work of art. For example, Frances Gallardo sought the help of a carpenter and a sound specialist for the work *Huracán* (Fig. 4). This delicate and poetic piece, inspired by 18th century organettes, fuses sound and movement by combining the sounds of the records played in the machine with the sound of hurricanes. The movement of this natural phenomenon is also suggested by a colored paper disc made in fretwork which revolves on the organette. This method of collaboration is also present in the drawings by Alex Cerveny that were embroidered by María Elita Alvez Borges and Ana Claudia Bentos dos Santos (Fig. 5).



Fig.4 Frances Gallardo, *Carmen* (from the series "Huracanes"), 2011



Fig.5 Alex Cerveny, *Alma de Gato*, 2008
Embroiderers: Maria Elita Alvez Borges, Ana Claudia Bento dos Santos

Rafael Tufiño and Lorenzo Homar worked together in the creation of individual prints for the famous series *Plena* (Fig. 6). This is an outstanding set of prints that shows their mastery of the technique. Equally remarkable is the xylograph mural by Francisco Alameida and Jarbas Lopes entitled *Cará-theus* (Fig. 7). The series of prints and the mural contrast with the tendency in some postmodern art to neglect or reject technique, substituting it for improvisation and spontaneity. Lipovetsky associates these last two characteristics with the process of personalization that glorifies expression and individuality.



Fig.6 Rafael Tufiño, *Santa María* (from the series: *Las plenas* portfolio with Lorenzo Homar) 1955



Fig.7 Francisco de Almeida, *Cará-theús*, 2012

Other variants of collaborative practices are exemplified by those developed during the last two decades using the internet. In one of the essays of the catalogue these kinds of practices are described and examples are given of Puerto Rican artists that have delved into these methods, like the one by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Carlos Torres Lopes and Beatriz Irizarry Gautier. Their video shows an interview with Carlos Irizarry, a Puerto Rican artist who in the seventies threatened to hijack an airplane en route from San Juan to New York City as protest against the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. During the trial, Irizarry's lawyer argued that his defendant did not commit a crime because he performed a conceptual work of art. The court did not accept his arguments and the artist spent four years in prison. Years later, in an interview, the artist affirmed that it was not a performance but a political demonstration against the United States government. In the video fact and fiction are conflated transforming the political into the conceptual within the framework of the representation.

The Triennial, besides showing different types of collaborative art practices also showed a diverse selection of "artworks" ranging from aesthetic objects, documents, books, magazines, flyers, site specific works and other ephemeral works. The diversity of works posed several problems for their display and in relation to one another.

One aspect not adequately solved in the Triennial is the way in which video art, digital magazines and other works of this nature are displayed,

as videos compress, prolong and reverse time, making the viewing different from static images. In some instances, when monitors and other technology are placed next to paintings or prints it gives the impression that one should consider the machine itself, its surface, the material quality and other aspects of the object instead of the image projected. In my opinion, some video would require a special room with sitting facilities. In the Triennial, Jan Henle's video is one among many that can be fully appreciated due to the dark projection room where it is shown. This creates an appropriate atmosphere and the viewer can sit down to watch the images unfold through time.

The mixing and blurring of the distinction between aesthetic objects, documents, site specific works and other ephemeral works presents a challenge to art criticism and to the viewer as to how he or she should appraise them. It is also a challenge to museographers as to how the "works" should be displayed. This is the case of the propaganda and other printed material distributed by *Conboca* and *Area*.

An interesting montage of works in the Triennial is *Manufacture* by Camel Collective (Fig. 8). It includes two silkscreens, ten photographs and a script. The photos are mounted on one side of a frame and the script is placed behind each photo. The frames are hinged to the wall instead of hung, recalling Marcel Duchamp's *Sled* (1913-15) which was mounted on the wall by means of this small contraption.

In spite of the quality of many of the artworks and the success of several groups in fostering collaborative art practices, the Triennial gives a general impression of *déjà vu*. If an avant-garde profile was one of the selection criteria, some artworks seem to repeat what others have said or done before. Some are more attentive to fit a trend or to shock for the sake of shock. There are works and practices that, although completed in collaboration, highlight personal concerns similar to those participants in a television reality show. The reuse of the readymade by artists seems to confirm Octavio Paz's statement that appears in his book *La apariencia desnuda*: "The repetition of an act leads to an immediate degradation, to a

relapse into taste.”⁷ Repetitions of this old strategy do not make a difference but looks like an easy solution. Such works remind us of Eco, the nymph, which could only repeat what others have said. The void not only distinguishes our era, like Lipovetsky states, but also art.



Fig.8 Camel Collective, *Manufacture*, 2011

Besides documenting collaborative practices by artists, groups and alternative spaces, the Triennial also confirms the transient nature of collaboration as a practice. As Úrsula Davila Villa comments in her essay, the need to build self-sustaining models of collaboration is an imperative one in order to generate stronger communities.⁸ I would add that these models are necessary to make people conscious of the solidarity that is required to forge a better quality of life in communities. The artistic hive endorses the support and social responsibility that the committed artist assumes within a group. However, can contemporary artists also assume the anonymity and generosity that some collaborative art practices impose, while at the same time, keep their egos and the pursuit of

⁷ Octavio Paz, *La apariencia desnuda. La obra de Marcel Duchamp* (México: Biblioteca Era. 1979), 33-34.

⁸ Úrsula Dávila Villa, *El Panal/The Hive. 3ra Trienal Poli/gráfica de San Juan*, (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 2012), 216.

personal gain in check? Moreover, the aesthetic value and the social effects of collaborative art practices are questioned due to the fact that some of their methodologies are similar to corporatist ones.⁹ These are issues that artists and groups concerning collaborative art practices confront today, reason why it is an important achievement for the San Juan Polygraphic Triennial to have dealt with this topic posing more questions than answers.

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⁹ Nikos Papastergiadis, "The Global Need for Collaboration".