Make it with you

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' "Peer Pleasure I" explores the pleasures and pains of artist collectives

By Katie Kurtz

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Artist collectives aren't necessarily a new concept – Dada and Fluxus are early examples of artists emerging fro their studios and coming together. The 1980s and '90s saw more politically engaged groups like Gran Fury, the Guerilla Girls, Group Material, and General Idea. Emerging collectives that continue within this lineage – whether political or apolitical – are part of an overall trend in contemporary art that leans more toward the home-based, handcrafted, and community-building aspects of artmaking. It's also a way for everyone involved to go offline and engage in more personal and meaningful interactions.

"Peer Pleasure I" is the third exhibition in Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' series of four programs focused on t continuing trend of local, national, and international artist collectives. The four shows, all featured in YBCA's upper galleries, have been carefully curated to present a diverse cross section of collectives functioning and making work together. Preceded by "The Zine Unbound: Kults, Werewolves and Sarcastic Hippies" and "Bay Are Now 4" (including contributions by Hamburger Eyes, the Gestalt Collective, the Momentary Academy, Mail Orde Brides, and Stretcher), "Peer Pleasure I" highlights three collectives that place social engagement at the heart of their practice: Royal Art Lodge, Space 1026, and Instant Coffee.

More recently established collectives include Fort Thunder, K48, Paper Rad, as well as the groups to be featured in the final show of the YBCA series, "Peer Pleasure II" (which opens in March): Red 76, Temporary Services, ar the VISIBLE Collective. San Francisco is home to a number of organizations that spun out of collectives and collaborations, such as New Langton Arts, Intersection for the Arts, Cameraworks, and Southern Exposure; new collectives are formed all the time, like Rock Paper Scissors and Lobot, both in Oakland. The list continues to grow as up-and-coming artists are inspired by the energy and success of their predecessors. If, as Carl Jung wrote, "All art intuitively apprehends coming changes in the collective unconsciousness," then artist collectives contribute to articulating a collective consciousness that emerges during a specific time and from a particular place. "Peer Pleasure I" brings us news of these moments from outside the Bay Area.

Managing one group show is more like herding cats with attention deficit disorder and much less like putting on an exhibition featuring three collectives – but organizing four such shows back-to-back? Assistant visual arts curator Berin Golonu, who is heading up this slate of programming, was intrigued by the element of surprise inherent in bringing artist collectives in for site-specific installations. "With this process of working, the results a unscripted. The process is very democratic, and more variants are thrown into the mix. The only downfall of working collectives is that, since it is so unscripted, you don't know what's going to happen," she said. Most curators would find this proposition nerve-wracking and counterintuitive to the process of mounting an exhibitic However, working this way allows for the results to be so contemporary that often the paint and glue have bare dried before the exhibition is open to the public. The approach also permits collectives to respond to and be mo inclusive of the immediate community they're working in.

OUT OF ISOLATION

Royal Art Lodge started amid the harsh winters and geographical isolation of Winnipeg. Originally comprising seven artists, RAL currently consists of Michael Dumontier, Marcel Dzama, and Neil Farber (Dzama's uncle). Dzama's spindly figures are perhaps the most recognizable work of the three artists, but each member has had

successful career, exhibiting internationally as RAL as well as individually.

At the end of their weekly Wednesday-night get-togethers, successful work is placed in the "sun" suitcase, somewhat-successful pieces in the "sad cloud" case, and failures in the "to be destroyed" suitcase. (Frankly, I'd be interested in seeing what's inside the last one.) The titles of the works indicate their overall tone: *Puddle of Friends, Disappointment Wins,* and the self-explanatory *Sorrow and Solitude. These are the precious things.* The simple compositions read like visual diary entries of a shared experience, with inside jokes encoded in the text and images, and references that only the artists are privy to; the titles connote a sense of these shared secrets. A suite of 80 paintings that first appeared at Douglas Hyde Gallery, in Dublin, are on view at YBCA.

COLLECTIVE DIY

Space 1026 was founded by the occupants of the top two floors of a building in Philadelphia's Chinatown that's home to artist studios and a gallery; today its members – currently around 30 – are united by their past or present affiliation with the space. One member, who spoke to me anonymously because of interpersonal dynamics (other members would wonder why he, rather than anyone else, speaks for the group), described their process as a kind of game: "You need two teams – the protagonists and the dreamers – in order to keep it dynamic. If one side were to win all the time, then it would probably stop."

He believes that Space 1026's ties to the community have made it successful. "Philadelphia is a really segregated city," he continued, "and I've met people there that I wouldn't have otherwise."

Its primary collective activity is producing silk-screen prints, numerous examples of which are wheat-pasted to a wall at Space 1026 in Philly. An overriding aesthetic for the posters has emerged from the fact that the artists really didn't know how to go about making screen prints – my source told me he later learned the "correct" technique and realized that Space 1026 had made up its own process. At YBCA the collective has reproduced this wall with additional installation elements and ephemera culled from its members.

INSTANT COMMUNITY

Collectives often arise to fill a void or contribute something to a community that it may otherwise be lacking. Instant Coffee – whose most consistent members are Jinhan Ko, Jenifer Papararo, Kate Monro, Cecilia Berkovic, and Jon Sasaki – create frameworks for possibilities. These "frameworks" are better known as events or parties, and the Vancouver/Toronto group's interest lies in the social engagement that happens while developing activities as opposed to producing a singular and static final product.

For "Peer Pleasure I" the IC artists have built BASS Bench, a custom DJ station and lounge that will allow visitors to play records. The BASS Bench is a departure from their BASS Bed, a site that inspired make-out parties in the past.

IC forged Bay Area ties during its residency at "The Way We Work," a fall 2004 Southern Exposure group exhibition that examined collaborative practices. As a result, local artists Chris Sollars, Joyce Grimm, and Courtney Fink are curating "scenarios" and "interventions" at BASS Bench during the exhibit's run.

According to Golonu, the intention behind YBCA's four-part series is to warm up the typically cool walls of the white cube and to provide more points of entry for the public to use the space as a site for their own creative or social activities. "More and more art centers with experimental and creative platforms are going in this direction," she said.

As a publicly funded institution, YBCA also has an obligation to create public programming. But how do you keep such programming from seeming artificial or unresponsive to the community? "You have to choose the right people who will bring the right ingredients in," Golonu said. Doubtless, new collaborations will be formed with this inspired, and inspiring, mix.

PEER PLEASURE I Through March 26 Opens Thurs/12, 6-9 p.m. Runs Tues.-Wed. and Fri.-Sun., noon-5 p.m.; Thurs., noon-8 p.m. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts 701 Mission, SF (415) 978-ARTS $3-$6 www.ybca.org