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Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945

by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, Editors
 University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2007
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The radical critique of art/Art in Western culture since Duchamp and, more generally, the birth of Modernism around 1850, has had, of course, its own blind spots—for instance, those linked with class, sex, gender, race, and so on. The "expanded" radical critique of art has tackled these and comparable issues, but its eagerness to unearth all hidden determinations of what we call art continues also to suffer from an even more special kind of blindness, because even the most critical art theory often still relies on an extremely individualist way of thinking. Neither the death of the subject, nowadays a commonly accepted notion, nor the widespread awareness of the institutional determination of any artist's work have prevented critical art theory from adopting the traditional market-driven idea of art as basically made by individual artists and judged by individual standards and achievements.

The major merit of the fascinating collection edited by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette is not to claim room for a completely different approach (this would be nothing more than radical, countercultural, or antiglobalist propaganda or wishful thinking, to name just some labels that have an obvious family resemblance with the collectivist stance). It is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the relationships between modernity and collectivism and to complete it with a certain number of case studies and surveys of collective art practices in Western and non-Western contexts.

Let us first see how, on a historical and theoretical level, the place

and the stakes of collectivism are analyzed by the editors as well as by the various contributors of the book (there is indeed no sharp division here between editors and contributors: the former sign a comparatively modest, although far-reaching introduction; the latter are allowed to participate very actively in the elaboration of the theoretical underpinnings of the volume). Three key ideas constitute the backbone of the collection:

1. There is a fundamental association between Modernism and collectivism, at least in the pre-World War II period, when all modernist movements were, to a variable extent, committed to social change and the implementation of new—and often socialist—relationships within the production and reception of art.
2. This "natural" alliance has been broken by the Cold War, which has reinforced the anti-Modernism of art in communist countries and has "decollectivized" Modernism in capitalist countries. Modern art in the West became not only more and more form-oriented (and thus less and less content-oriented), but erased also any collaborative or collectivist tendency as ideologically and artistically suspect.
3. The hegemonic position of the individualist model, first in the West only, later worldwide, has never been complete, however. Forms of resistance have always existed, and their presence and importance are now spreading dramatically. In this regard, the editors—more than the authors themselves, one may have the impression—make a clear distinction between on the one hand modernist collectivisms—i.e. collectivist reuses and reinventions of the avant-gardes and other radical idioms—and on the other hand non-modernist collectivisms. The latter are either anti-Western and anti-modernist "Gemeinschaft"-like nostalgias (the name of Al-Qaida as a short-cut for this type of nowadays very violent movements is, of course, unparalleled) or hypercapitalist, rhizomatic, decentralized and virtual communities glued together by e-commerce (and the editors stress that these communities share with the anti-capitalist group a deep longing for the same traditional relationships between the individual and the group, or between the individual and the State).

Further specification of what modernist collectivisms typically (and positively) are, can only be found in the various essays, whose theoretical ambitions are quite diverse. Some contributors limit themselves to a historical overview of the most interesting phenomena in the geographic area they cover (for this is the basic criterion of the book's structure). Other, instead, use their case study or studies to present a more in-depth discussion of the theoretical questions that the concept of collectivism helps to raise. Recurrent elements are, for instance, the tension between the aesthetic and the social (in some extreme examples, there is nothing artistic left in the collective actions that are described), the hugely problematic relationship with the institution (always eager to appropriate its critique, even in the extreme case of the so-called "Trojan horse"-techniques embraced by some of the groups), the relationship with the audience (that can no longer be just a consumer) and, last but not least, the possible ways to exceed the historical split in Modernism between Dada and Bauhaus, between

collectivist destruction and collectivist destruction. An exceptionally interesting piece is Okwui Enwezor's discussion of collectivism in African art, which completes the introduction in four useful ways:

1. It questions further the Western look on collectivism, mainly through a critique of the historical Grant Narrative of collectivism within (high) Modernism.
2. It reformulates the difficult relationship between individual and group, primarily through a discussion of the notion of "authenticity".
3. It opens new ways of theorizing different kinds of collectivism, principally through the opposition between the more or less stable group as a kind of beehive-supra-individual (the vocabulary and metaphors are mine) and the flexible networks including shifting individuals on a more ephemeral basis.
4. It criticizes—very rightly I think—the confusion between ethics and politics, stressing that the current success of the ethical is in fact the direct outcome of a refusal of the political.

Yet given the emphasis on the historical and contextual presentation of the collectivist "file", the theoretical fine-tuning of collectivism is not the priority of this collection. One may regret, for example, the absence of a systematic debate on the differences between the collaborative and the collectivist, which are anything but synonyms. What we receive instead is a very rich, but sometimes overdescriptive and overdetailed, survey of collectivist artistic action in all parts of the world (only China, the Islam world, and Australia are missing). Most inspiring are also the many discussions with anti-collectivist interpretations of collective art forms, the best example being Chris Gilbert's analysis of "Art and Language" and his critique of Benjamin Buchloh's reading of conceptual art as a kind of bureaucratic and socially alienated Modernism (by the way: most readers will easily recognize the title's tongue-in-cheek allusion to Thierry de Duve's "Kant after Duchamp").

Collectivism after Modernism. The Art of Social Imagination after 1945 provides us with a new "map" of Modernism since World War II. A very challenging and exciting map, since it is one that is not compatible with any dominant paradigm or conceptualization of what Modernism used to be and could become once again in a near future.

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