Contrary to some strains of popular belief, collectivism is artmaking not only with many but for many. For the historical avant-garde—like the Dadaists or the Constructivists—it embodied the revolutionary power of communal force, one that would, in the future, alleviate the alienation of capitalist individualism. For artists during the Cold War, it meant sharing an experience beyond that of mass consumption, at a time when communal utopias of the recent past were, at best, dismissed as naïve phantasmas or, at worst, seen as having materialized in the form of totalitarian regimes. And a few years ago, fueled by curatorial interest, a trend emerged of group art practice as a kind of clubby tribalism.

To understand the various forms of postwar collectivism as historically determined phenomena and to articulate the possibilities for contemporary collectivist art production is the aim of Collectivism after Modernism. The essays assembled in this anthology argue that to make truly collective art means to reconsider the relation between art and public; examples from the Situationist International and Group Material to Paper Tiger Television and the Congolese collective Le Groupe Amos make the point. To construct an art of shared experience means to go beyond projecting what Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette call the “imagined community”: a collective has to be more than an ideal, and more than communal craft; it has to be a truly social enterprise. Not only does it use unconventional forms and media to communicate the issues and experiences usually excluded from artistic representation, but it gives voice to a multiplicity of perspectives. At its best it relies on the participation of the audience to actively contribute to the work, carrying forth the dialogue it inspires.

—PHILIP GLAHN

Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945 came out from the University of Minnesota Press in January.

WHO CARES

CREATIVE TIME

In 1846 Edgar Allan Poe composed an essay titled “The Philosophy of Composition” in which he describes writing “The Raven” as though it were an entirely rational, top-down exercise, involving no nebulous inspirational moment. But the essay is a ruse: Poe’s true aim is to indict the notion that artistic creation proceeds from the general to the specific, and the satirical format obviates the pitfalls of discussing the largely inscrutable misrecognitions of the world that are the kernels of all artistic acts.

Creative Time’s recently published Who Cares, an edited transcript of three dinner conversations moderated by artist and activist Doug Ashford, takes the opposite view. “The necessity for open-ended discourse evolves into specific value and example,” asserts Ashford, responding to his former Group Material collaborator Julie Ault’s concern that conversation is not productive for developing strategies for art’s engagement with the world. But Ashford’s framing of the conversations as “working meetings” intended to develop strategies for art’s socio-political engagement could be seen as a ruse all its own. While the discussions range from the position of artists in a globalized economy to the seeming disconnect between aesthetics and politics to a more anecdotal conversation about art after 9/11, the specifics of what politically engaged artists ought to be up to is left to us.

Nevertheless, the participants’ provocations (especially those of Ault, Paul Chan, Coco Fusco, Creative Time’s Anne Pasternak, and Amy Sillman) are, if not always particularly insightful, consistently inciting (Can art model a better world? Should it?). And that’s the point. Despite the occasional self-congratulatory and “these kids today” indulgence, Who Cares successfully encourages at least this reader to get involved in every step of the conversation, with or without a worked-out strategy to change the world.

—ALEXANDER SETH CAMERON

Who Cares was published in October 2006.

PROXEMICS SERIES

JRP/RINGIER AND LES PRESSES DU RÉEL

Proxemics, a collection of writings by installation artist Liam Gillick, is a departure from the previous four volumes in the Positions series: by John Miller, Thomas Lawson, Mike Kelley, and David Robbins. It marks a shift to a younger generation, and to England from the U.S. But it remains consistent with the mission of the series, which features artists who supplement their visual output with reviews, interviews, polemical essays, manifestos, and, in Robbins’s case, fiction. Such texts are essentially dialogues, providing insight into the artist-author as well as his artist-subjects. Indeed, these writers often seem to be speaking of their own work while taking on that of others. Moreover, as practitioners, they are not only acutely