



## Defining “We” 2017: The Study Center for Group Work

by Heather Schatz

Collaboration has increasingly become an organizing principal of society due to our reliance on interactive technologies that allow, and demand, working together across distinct and distant geographic and temporal zones. But it has also become a more common part of any contemporary artists’ practice as illustrated by the emergence of the new online Study Center for Group Work under the administration of artist, activist, and educator Caroline Woolard.

Broadly speaking collaboration is when two or more individuals come together to actively share mutual desires and ideas to produce a co-authored project. To succeed, it requires communication, structure, and a range of methodologies, building on one another’s strengths and weaknesses, challenging individual methods and suppositions, communicating through both traditional and new technologies, and perhaps most importantly, compromising and pushing the boundaries of all participants involved.

Within the arts, and more specifically in the art world, collaboration has been defined in two ways: 1) the decision to work together collaboratively as a singular identity (Gilbert & George, Christo and Jean Claude), or, 2) as a collective (Bernadette Corporation, Guerrilla Girls). Both challenge the cultural values placed on art as the achievement of an individual. *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* published a special issue on collaboration in 1999 where they acknowledge, “the collaborative projects discussed herein are diverse, but each has one shared element: a mutually-agreed upon genesis. Individuals with disparate opinions and aesthetics must at some point decide how these differences can be reconciled in the service of a shared goal, and how to continue this process in an efficient and productive manner.”

In keeping with the current collaborative turn, Study Center for Group Work has been created as the continuation of an exhibition titled *Wound (to wind a clock)* initiated by Woolard at the invitation of curator Stamatina Gregory at Cooper Union in 2016. While Woolard is cited as originating the idea in 2013, it is crucial that the design follows a series of case studies contributed by the twenty-two artists directly involved in the creation of the content of the website. This is the website’s strength as it is not about defining collaboration as a noun (e.g., authorship and identity), but instead approaches collaboration as a verb, as a democratic form of working together. As state in the FAQ section; “A few years ago, we began to

notice that many visual artists had developed methods of listening and group work. Yet they did not have a way to share their work with one another or with the public."

In keeping with the premise of a working study center, the aesthetic of the web design, programmed by artist and musician Or Zubalsky, emphasizes legibility and ease of access; all of the content is in a one-page format with menu links to the main sections: METHODS, ARTISTS, EVENTS, RESOURCES, and FAQ. The low-tech aesthetic, while approachable, struck me at first like the choice to walk on a freeway, instead of driving a car, until I realized the reluctance to jazz up the website, to keep it focused on the functional, is actually its strength.

An indication of the study center's scope is found in the METHODS section which groups modes of working together with unusual actions. The information is presented via a simple PDF download with background on the contributor and content.

**group functioning** (Asset Mapping) (Diagram Hacking), **decision-making** (Voting and Ranking), **role clarification** (Threeing) (Questions for Schematic Theater), **healing and care** (Support), **shared leadership** (Leadership Compass), **communication** (Hand Signals) (Intergroup Dialog) (A Field Guide to Spatial Intimacy), **conflict resolution** (Shark, Owl, Turtle, Teddy Bear, Fox), **reflection** (Three-Line Matrix) (Group Self-Assessment), **analysis of images and systems** (Project 404) (Mirror/Echo/Tilt), and **speculative futures** (Objects as Fictions, The Alternative Unknowns).

"A Field Guide to Spatial Intimacy" contributed by Chloë Bass, a multi-form conceptual artist, includes a PDF titled "The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Four: It's amazing we don't have more fights". The booklet includes exercises that are a result of her interest in intimacy and in particular "where patterns hold and break" as group sizes change. *Mirror/Echo/Tilt* is a project created by artists Melanie Crean, Shaun Leonardo, and Sable E. Smith. The group collaborated with people who are involved in or affected by the criminal justice system. Their contribution describes how they work with participants to use visual storytelling to translate personal narratives. The team explains "our goal is to facilitate participants' agency to tell their own stories and ultimately, reframe existing narratives defining the "criminal." And in "Object Lesson," artist, educator, and writer, Judith Leemann describes her work as "crafting wordless explanations," where she "looks for ways to move studio teaching methodologies into other contexts and to interrupt classroom habits by bringing in carefully curated noise."

Since this is not a site about collaborative artistic identity but the active work involved in collaborating, the overall intent of the Study Center for Group Work is practical and generative. The website asks for others to join (this is done in a modest ask at the bottom of the homepage) in order to create a working online library. If the website succeeds in building a network of individuals and groups and their methodologies it would provide support for the hypothesis that collaboration is integral to a larger pool of working artists than just artists who work in pairs or collectives. The FAQ section states that the site exists for art spaces, collectives, worker-owned businesses, art classes, and working-groups. As such, it should extend to the larger context of the arts and more critically, beyond to include fields outside of the arts and their collaborative methods. The website's efforts to record active examples of collaborative methods in the context of the arts is a valid starting point, and whether the website grows beyond these twenty-two initial contributors, remains to be seen. Visit the website, add your working methods and become contributor twenty-three or join the email list to stay informed as the site develops. [www.STUDYCOLLABORATION.com](http://www.STUDYCOLLABORATION.com).