

Collective Dialogism; Or the new aesthetics of talking to each other

By Elizabeth Kauffman

“[Operator] You have a collect call from, [*Vader's voice*] Darth Vader.”¹

It's been years since I've received a collect call, and even longer since I've made one. In the age of cell phones, those of us in the more fortunate parts of the world and in the more fortunate wage brackets have little need for calling collect. The last collect call I can remember getting happened when I was in college. I was living in an apartment with four other girls and I received a collect call from an unknown man. It wasn't anyone I knew but with roommates you never know who is dating whom, so I stayed on the line and waited for the location. He was calling from the state penitentiary. I paused for a moment. Did any of my roommates have a secret boyfriend in prison? I ultimately thought it unlikely and didn't accept the call. Looking back on this I find it very sad. This man was using one of his few chances to connect with the outside world and the connection couldn't be made. His friend, lover, or family member, must have moved without his knowledge. This prisoner's predicament of being out of touch seems like a metaphor for a larger trend in recent years of missed connections.

We live in a world of ever-present communication. Our abilities to share our words and thoughts have never been easier or more immediate. Yet, as Paul Chan writes, “One of the great mysteries of our time...is how the ever-expanding methods by which we communicate with one another—from cell phones to SMS, from e-mail to Twitter, from Facebook to Chatroulette—are alienating us from others and ourselves.”² As we drown in twitter posts and facebook feeds, we don't seem to be growing any closer to our friends and families. And as many have wondered, what is all the time we waste on social media really worth and to whom? Social media and other communications-based companies are, after all, for-profit entities. This means that their fundamental purpose to capitalize on our communication puts more emphasis on quantity than it does quality. Verizon could care less if you had a really deep and meaningful conversation with your mother last week; instead they care most how many minutes that conversation lasted. Returning to Paul Chan, “technology economizes communication,” it doesn't make it any more comprehensible. With the various technologies and platforms through which we can express ourselves, few offer any enhancement to our expression and most truncate or compress communication into forms not aimed at understanding or intelligibility but at “reach, ubiquity, and consumption.”³

¹ Transcription from Robot Chicken.

² Paul Chan from “The Unthinkable Community”, *e-flux*, No. 16 (May 2010)

³ *ibid.*

Within the present state of industrialized communication, *Dial Collect* presents the efforts of artists to reconnect with others beyond the sanctioned methods in our technocratic society. *Dial Collect* is based on Calcagno Cullen's theory of *Collective Dialogism*, which she first conceived of in 2008. Collective Dialogism places emphasis on the dialogic qualities of a work of art and its potential lasting impact on a community. In this type of work visual aesthetics are the result of engagement and communication. As a form of Social Practice, this exhibition and the ideas behind it rest on ideas of community, participation, aesthetics and epistemology that this essay will explore. Collective Dialogism is itself in *dialogue* with several compelling ideas, some past and many recent, and it is that dialogue which this essay aims to transcribe.

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“There is a specter haunting capitalism’s globalization, the specter of a new collectivism.”⁴

The above quote is from Blake Stimson’s and Gregory Sholette’s introduction to the book *Collectivism After Modernism*. With this book, editors Stimson and Sholette work towards a periodization of collectivism, establishing it first as a driving force of the social imagination of modernism. Nationalism, communism, racism, classism, and professionalism all serve to identify the individual with a particular group; and it was these isms that dominated the modern era and in turn became the fodder for artistic output. Stimson and Sholette quote Mondrian’s desire to fight “against everything individual in man,” but there are countless similar examples from the history of modern art.⁵ The battles between the collectives of the modern era, such as between the 1960s counter-culture and the conservatives in the United States, were disputes of representation. During the cold war era in particular as Stimson and Sholette point out, the medium and concerns of collective social forms were cultural; in other words groups from the Situationists to Group Material to the Yes Men have been primarily concerned with representation. These collectives can be seen as social experiments that serve as the foundation for the new collectivism.

The new collectivism then, is not as preoccupied with representation, but rather is concerned with creation. As artists and others look back on the promises of the 1960s, we are mostly disheartened by the lack of effectiveness. By that I mean wonderful world-changing ideas were circulating at that time, but they were not able to slow the velocity of corporate hegemony or cultural imperialism (to name just a few demons of the modern world). So to refer again to the book and its title, collectivism *after* modernism, suggests a move beyond what was previously established during the history of collectivisms. That move has pushed collective

⁴ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 1

⁵ *ibid.* p. 5

action beyond cultural battles of representation to actual battles, such as the Arab Spring or the Occupy Wall Street movements. The urgency for real action is of course local and related to specific political situations, yet with capitalism's global reach the entire world is now "subjugated by the commodity form and the spectacle it generates," therefore the "only remaining theater of action is direct engagement with forces of production."⁶ Artists working in a, or with the, collective are no longer simply fighting for particular social identities, but they are fighting to change the very fabric of society itself, and they are doing this not by waving a different flag but by taking direct action within social groups. In some particularly poignant situations this type of direct action has led to incarceration, which points to the effectiveness of the action itself.

The current urge for action over representation may be spurred by not only the bankruptcy of our economic system but also by the bankruptcy of our counterculture. In Douglas Haddow's article for *Adbusters Magazine*, "Hipsters" are labeled as the "dead end of western civilization."⁷ Hipsterism, a style of dress—and for the truly committed a style of living—that appeared in the urban centers of the western world in the mid-1990s. The grand irony of this "counterculture" is that most who obviously adhere to its style would be horrified if you called them what they are, a hipster. Unlike previous countercultures, hipsterism does not have any identifiable political stance or social agenda beyond being "cool". Its only real identifiable ethos is apathy and irony. It is the first counterculture to be born and raised under the "advertising industry's microscope, leaving it open to constant manipulation but also forcing its participants to continually shift their interests and affiliations," Haddow points out. He defines this group as less of a subculture and more of a consumer group that "mirrors the doomed shallowness of mainstream society." If our counterculture provides no real alternatives to the mainstream, then it is by definition bankrupt. Thus this points back to the call for action over representation. Returning once again to Stimson and Sholette, "This means neither picturing social form nor doing battle in the form of representation, but instead engaging with social life as production, engaging with social life itself as a medium of expression."⁸

Within this new collectivism is where we find Collective Dialogism. It is concerned with producing social life and with using social life itself as a medium of artistic expression. Where objects were once the sole focus of aesthetics, in Collective Dialogism communication becomes another aesthetic criteria of the art. Goals of representation are replaced with aims to transform society. Since the early 1970s the dematerialization of the art object has been complete, yet today the public still

⁶ *ibid.* p. 12

⁷ Douglas Haddow, "Hipster: The Dead End of Western Civilization," *Adbusters Magazine*, #79 (Sep/Oct 2008).

⁸ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 13

largely understands art as a fabricated thing, such as a painting or a sculpture.⁹ The emphasis on a specific class of objects as art comes to us via Hegelian philosophy, however if we take a generational step back to the 18th Century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, we find aesthetic experience defined as “potential communicability that is not necessarily related to works of art per se.”¹⁰ Collective Dialogism fits best here as it accepts the public’s expectation for the object-ness of art yet places the importance on not only form but conversation as well. If we take a moment and review some Kantian philosophy, both from the man himself and his later interpreters, we will find some insightful ways to understand the aesthetics of dialogue.

Immanuel Kant is best known for his three volume treatises on metaphysics, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Critique of Judgment*. The first of the three deals with logical reasoning, the second with morality, and the third with aesthetic judgments. Art critics, such as Clement Greenberg, have long used Kant’s ideas from the third critique to bolster their aesthetic theories, and many have unfortunately treated this text in isolation.¹¹ In 2009, artist and philosopher, Adrian Piper, published “Intuition and Concrete Particularity in Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetics,”¹² and in this essay she seeks to correct prior misreadings of Kant’s third critique. Piper recontextualizes Kant’s ideas about how we judge beauty by bringing his thoughts on reason and the self into the discussion, and treating the three volumes sequentially interdependent, as Kant had originally intended.

By Kant’s aims the third *Critique* was meant to offer a solution to the “incalculable gulf” inherent in his philosophy between the tangible experience of objects in the world and the transcendental, or supernatural source of all things. (Whether and how he solves this dualism is still up for heated debate among Kantian scholars.) Judgments of taste, as opposed to other sorts of judgments, present a special occasion to examine this gulf because of their odd location beyond both rationalism and empiricism. If I find something agreeable or pleasurable this is most obviously a subjective experience and opinion, however if I call it beautiful then my subjective experience must be somehow objective. Beauty is a shared principle so for things I find beautiful to actually be such *you* have to find them beautiful too. Thus beauty is neither a rational conclusion nor an empirical fact, rather it rests somewhere in

⁹ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...*, University of California Press, 1973.

¹⁰ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, p. 89

¹¹ After 1943 Greenberg refers to Kant often. Some of his most famous writings come from this period, namely those that truly shaped the initially dominant theories of artistic modernism. In his “Seminar” essays in the 1970s he does correct some of his misuse of Kant, but these are largely overlooked texts.

¹² *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy and Art Practice*, Francis Halsall, Julie Jansen, and Tony O’Connor, Stanford University Press, 2009.

between as shared experience.

Piper situates aesthetic judgment, and the paradox described above, within Kant's account of our knowledge of objects in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, found in the first *Critique*. Here Kant sets up the two poles of understanding: intuition, which is the unmediated empirical experience of objects, and knowledge, which is the conceptualization of those objects resulting from reason. In order to recognize the concrete particulars of our intuition we must have some knowledge of the concepts to which those intuitions apply, according to Kant. On the flip side, Piper points out, "without any interference of any form of conceptual indoctrination," we can have direct and unmediated contact with concrete particulars. This either/or situation sets up a dilemma, especially in the case of practicing artists. Artists have direct and unmediated intuitive access to the things they create, but according to Kant's dichotomy of intuition and knowledge, artists should have no idea what they are doing. What Piper, through Kant, is essentially presenting is similar to the contemporary scientific and educational debates on the difference between left-brain and right-brain knowledge.

To solve this dilemma Piper builds on Kant's conditions for the unity of the self with yogic philosophy. Kant argues for a "dual subject" as Allen Wood refers to it in his book, *Kant*. This dual subject corresponds to the duality of perspective with which each individual subject experiences the world. For Kant, knowledge of the world is formed by a combination of intuitions and judgments. Intuitions in the Kantian context are not gut feelings as most would identify them, but direct sensory experiences. These raw intuitions, gathered by the senses, are then made sense of by the mind. A perceiving subject after experiencing a round, red, smooth object would then make a judgment that the object is an apple. "Intuitions without concepts are blind."¹³ The dilemma rises out of Kant's definition of consciousness as a "the coherently organized experience of a unified subject, that is, of an individual ego."¹⁴ In this model we must organize sense data according to conceptual categories to be conscious of things at all, and those categories are inherent to the ego and cannot be separated from it. Thus a subject can have no unmediated experience of an object. To get around this problem, Piper suggests trading the model of self that is found in Samkhyan philosophy for the Kantian one. Samkhya and Vedanta are two main systems of Hindu philosophy, which are based on the intellect. Spirit and matter are considered two independent principles of existence in Samkhya, while in Vedanta, spirit and matter are considered two parts of one greater ultimate reality. In Samkhya rational thought is a function of the mind, as is the ego, meaning it is objective and impersonal, akin to a mechanical device. Yet the consciousness is someplace beyond the mind, not inextricably connected to it. In other words the mind and the spirit are not the same, whereas within the Kantian self, the mind is one and the same with the spirit or the soul and cannot be separated.

¹³ Allen W. Wood ed., *Basic Writings of Kant*, Modern Library, 2001, p. 39

¹⁴ *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy and Art Practice*, Francis Halsall, Julie Jansen, and Tony O'Connor, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 206

The advantage of using a philosophy where ego and mind can be separated from the innate part of the self is that we can entertain the possibility of experiencing an unmediated reality. This unmediated experience is the very goal of advanced yogic meditation, and it is achieved through the “dismantling or death of the ego,” which is, “not equivalent to the death of consciousness.”¹⁵ The path of yogic enlightenment is outlined in reverse in Kant’s account of synthesis as Piper points out:

Kant’s whole point is that there is only one set of representations that, properly systematized, simultaneously and interdependently constitute both. Tersely put, there are subjects if and only if there are objects of consciousness; dismantle one and you automatically dismantle the other.¹⁶

From this complex and technical argument, we find a philosophy of aesthetics that is based on the fully interdependent relationship between subjects and objects. This implies that artists must dismantle their ego structures to make truly “beautiful” work: work cultivated from a direct unmediated relationship with things in the world yet fully self-aware. This theory also implies that the more deeply we understand and unravel the complexities of a work of art, the more we come face-to-face with our own selves. It is often said that the first step toward change is acknowledgment, and with that same idea in mind it seems Piper’s combination of Kantian and Yogic philosophy gives us a theory that places works of art at the threshold of self-discovery and transformation. This mimics a general consensus that Grant Kester outlines in his book, *Conversation Pieces*. Kester summarizes that the gradual consolidation in modern and postmodern art theory that stipulates “that the work of art must question and undermine shared discursive conventions. This model has proved so durable because the dynamic it targets continues to operate in our culture, as we impose reductive stereotypes on people and experiences that we define as different and implicitly threatening to our own static self-image.”¹⁷ Kester also suggests that the “indeterminateness” of this type of aesthetics must be found not in the object but in the type of conversation it generates.¹⁸ Therefore, beauty becomes a catalyst for personal growth, and in turn social change. This brings us right back to Kant who saw a close link between art and morality. Kant thought that, “beauty and sublimity give us an authentic feeling for morality, and even an experience of freedom.”¹⁹ If indeed, as Piper suggests, unmediated experience of works of art unravel the mysteries of the self, and ultimately reveal other truths as well, then Kant’s “experience of freedom” could very well be the freedom that is felt when the consciousness lets go of the ego.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 208

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 88-89

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 90

¹⁹ Allen W. Wood ed., *Basic Writings of Kant*, Modern Library, 2001, p. 152

What begins to take shape in this form of aesthetics is a type of epistemology. Dialogue becomes a conduit for new knowledge. This is the subject of an essay by Claire Pentecost titled, "Beyond Face." I found this essay in a tiny book (just three essays long) published by Green Lantern Press in Chicago, titled *Talking With Your Mouth Full: New Language for Socially Engaged Art*. Packed into this small package are some pithy texts on the subject of Social Practice. Pentecost's essay is of particular interest here because she theorizes a form of practice where "the artist serves as conduit between specialized knowledge fields and other members of the public sphere by assuming a role we call the Public Amateur."²⁰ The artist in the guise of the "Public Amateur" is someone who "consents to learn in public." Artists have the unique position of being public figures (what they do is seen by others) not required to accomplish any practical goals. They are free to dabble in any subject they choose; yet they are not officially part of these other academic or professional fields. Therefore they are beyond the power structure of a given discipline. As Pentecost theorizes, artists are able to answer questions and probe for truths that those within a particular field may be unable to. Essentially the value of artists is their ability to question authority and ultimately question the production of knowledge itself. This questioning does not happen in a vacuum but is part of a larger dialogue. As Pentecost writes:

Metaknowledge comes about between people. It's conversational. The value and meaning of the art our culture has developed is purposefully debatable; it flourishes between people. When the artist publicly conducts research using new guidelines and criteria, she launches the project of research itself into conversational reevaluation.²¹

To fully understand Collective Dialogism it is important to not only read the form of the art as conversational, but the entire *ism* itself as a dialogue with our assumptions about aesthetics, truth, society, and the world at large. Reading Collective Dialogism as the creation of metaknowledge takes us back to the realm of the symbolic, which is where philosophy, and usually art, resides. Yet as the 20th century hope that a symbolic critique of power would save us has faded, artists have realized the symbolic is only useful when it applies to the mundane. Collective Dialogism is not caught up in the naming of things, but the creation of conversations, literally and figuratively. And it is within these conversations that the beauty of this work is found. Crashing through boundaries between specialized labor, and refusing to uphold the separation between audience and performer, these artists pursue access to freedom, authenticity, and personal transformation.

²⁰ Claire Pentecost, "Beyond Face," *Talking With Your Mouth Full: New Language for Socially Engaged Art*, Green Lantern Press, 2008, p. 33

²¹ *ibid.* p. 39

Many have resisted the pushing of these boundaries. Since the birth of the avant-garde, those of us who are quite comfortable with our categories of labor and thought have attempted to reject the myriad ways artists have crossed these borders. Some prefer not to be brought into the action of creating and some have even felt violated by the transgression of the artist/audience divide. This should be no surprise since what this work is getting at, as described above, is the death of the ego. We are all programmed to hold on to the coherent unity of the self with a white-knuckled grip, and those situations, which push at this fragile structure, are most often met with hostility. So some works might [intentionally] make us feel quite uncomfortable, however, discomfort fails to be valid grounds for dismissal. It is rather another voice within the dialogue; and no party within the conversation has the right to dismiss the others. We of course always have the option to avoid the conversation altogether. We avoid it at our detriment though, by keeping ourselves isolated and cut-off, and ultimately limiting our own growth. For my part, I know the next time I get a collect call—no matter the origin—I will definitely accept the charges.
