

Free Your Collaboration

by Trebor Scholz

A variety of new tools for collective cultural practices emerged over the past few years. The Internet has become increasingly interwoven in the fabric of everyday life through mailing lists, chat rooms, collaborative weblogs and wikis. From Murray Bookchin to Buckminster Fuller there is the search for radically different configurations of society itself: a society that is based on a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation. How do contemporary forms of cultural production make use of newly available collaborative tools to subvert corporate models of forced cooperation and foster self-organized, independent modes of cultural production and dissemination? Collaboration means, “to work together to achieve the same goal that we could not achieve as individuals.” Cooperation suggests people assist each other, walk in parallels; but in creative industries, collaborations are often forced. In *Gleicher als Andere*, the German critic Christoph Spehr emphasizes that in Free Cooperation anybody can leave the cooperation at any time, taking with them what they had put in.

Free Cooperation needs to pay off; even if there are disagreements, the

cooperation needs to remain workable. There is no ideal cooperation in which nobody is taken advantage of—there are always elements of compromise.

Examples of cooperative group models in the urban United States include Reclaim the Streets and Critical Mass. During the anti-war protests of 2003, cyclists in San Francisco, California, blocked major urban intersections and highways with hundreds of bicycles as part of Critical Mass. This was initiated by a leafleting campaign advertising times and dates of such actions, yet the campaign took place without any central leadership. Similarly, Reclaim the Streets is an equally decentralized model of taking back the public sphere. Other examples of community-organizing efforts include: broadcasting free radio, graffiti, and street parties. Jeff Ferrell highlights Radio Free ACTUP,

The Micro-Radio Empowerment Coalition, and Slave Revolt Radio. The green movement exemplifies a type of temporary alliance that chooses no one particular subject position (e.g. class, gender, race)

in pursuit of a shared goal (Laclau/ Mouffe). Founded in 1981, Paper Tiger TV presents a different consequential model of collaboration because it creates and distributes collectively produced activist video works that critique the media. The New York Citybased chamber orchestra, Orpheus, works without a conductor and rotates all of its functions among the musicians.

Recent history provides many examples of collaborations, including: Bureau d'Etudes, Twentieth Century, 010010111010101.org, Las Agencias, Luther Blissett, A-Clip, REPOhistory, Dorkbot, Art Workers Coalition, Critical Art Ensemble, Rtmart, and Group Material. Thinking of collaboration the most important art historical association is the Fluxus movement, which includes artists George Maciunas and Alan Kaprov. In 1961 Kaprov wrote the influential essay "Happenings in the New York Scene," presenting his ideas about interaction. For Kaprov, a happening simply meant that "something happens" and that visitors get something to do— artist and spectator interact. Today, the obsession with objects as described by Walter Benjamin is replaced with the obsession for simulation and interaction (Nichols).

Artists have taken the Internet on as a context for their work since its emergence, de-emphasizing individual authorship and answering Bertolt Brecht's demand for an apparatus that goes beyond distribution and allows communication (1932). Early projects aiming at collaborative authorship include Robert Adrian X's *Die Welt in 24 Stunden* (1983), Roy Ascott's project *La Plissure du texte* (1983), Norman White's *Hearsay* (1984), Douglas Davis' *The World's First Collaborative Sentence* (1994) and the project *Épreuves d'écritures* as part of the exhibition *Les Immatrieux* that was conceived by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1985). In the early 1990s projects like "De Digitale Stad" (Amsterdam) and "Internationale Stadt" (Berlin) established urban cooperative communities grouped around the idea of affordable access to the Internet for all.

Art institutions are neither interested in, nor supportive of Free Cooperation. The artist is desired as exemplary sufferer and genius, not as somebody who is in control of her work. The logic of the art world and that of technology-based art are opposed to each other.

The art world focuses on the romanticized idea of an author who creates an art object that can be distributed by many institutions. Technology-based art is variable, often ephemeral, discursive, concept-based, existent in many copies, collaboratively authored, and can be distributed online. Over the past number of years, communication tools like video conferencing, live chats, web cams, instant messaging, wikis and collaborative weblogs have become inexpensive and readily available. These outlets pose an alternative to the costly and less flexible structure of universities. Collaborative weblogs have better chances to accommodate differences in communication styles than classroom situations.

Consequentially, teachers may become primarily linkers to knowledge. Ted Nelson demands, “everybody must understand computers now!,” to take the power from the “computer high-ups.” This corresponds with Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who compares repressive uses of media with emancipatory applications. In these decentralized settings each receiver is a potential transmitter. The cooperative sound-experiment by the Xchange network (1997) exemplifies a resistance to the commercialization of the medium

More recently, online communication forums such as Friendster, LinkedIn, or Tribe offer easy-to-use forums for interaction. For instance, Friendster is a web-based application allowing users to network their friends based on social profiles. Free text books are put online at Wikibooks(.org), and many texts can be found at the Gutenberg Project (textz.org). The project Opentheory(.org) applies ideas of Free Software to the development of texts as users of the site improve on each others’ submissions. Wikiversity expresses the goal of facilitating learning through the Wiki-real-time logging format. The online initiative Wikipedia will become more comprehensive than classical encyclopedias in a few years. The aforementioned open content formats introduce a new production paradigm, offering new annotational and editorial opportunities and a potential for broad participation in the knowledge commons— from the collection, and re-combination, to the distribution of knowledge. In the context of the post-welfare state economy, these ideas of open theory and open content are also introduced into self-organized educational projects such as the “The University of Openess” (twentiethcentury.com). Collaborations should start with the building of trust, testing out the compatibility of values and interests, instead of immediately

focusing on the project goals. Social resources like trust, mutual respect, tolerance and shared values make it easier for people to work together. Based on this trust, true communication can take place. The term collaboration assumes that there is a common goal and that group participants share responsibility for it. Therefore, each collaborator needs to be given authority over her task. Collaborators need to get to know each other as people and need to find out about each other's agency and professional needs. Collaboration requires genuine dialogue, a human encounter full of presence; this requires the skills of receptivity and responsiveness.

At times, the dedication to the other person can be a bit scary, thus collaboration does not work for everybody. The ABC's of collaboration demand that needs are addressed and lines of communication kept open. Collaborations need to constantly change and question themselves, otherwise they will get trapped in their own definition.

Collective leadership is another important issue. Leadership should take turns in a collaboration. Leadership is usually defined by commitment of time, energy, resources and intellectual contribution. Commonly, the person who contributes the most to a project has the most say. This dynamic endangers the cooperation, as it marginalizes the otherwise more silent or withdrawn group members. Collaboration and consultation are increasingly inevitable, since technology-based artwork requires deeper levels of specialization bringing together technological and conceptual components. On- and offline there is the risk of involuntary altruism caused by the possibility of freeloaders in the collective process. We must ask: whose labor becomes invisible and which type of labor comes to the front stage? These issues of crediting are more developed in theatre, dance, architecture, music and film, where each person receives credit for her individual contribution. Some members of the Open Source movement suggest a tit-for-tat strategy based on exchanges of effort—one gives a bit of code and then receives a bit. Comparably, Jazz and Dance Improvisation actors study the moves of the others, and take turns leading. However, this improvisational freedom needs to be based on discipline (Brubeck). At best, collaborations can playfully spark off one another, with a "third body" resulting from a chorus (Green).

The free development of each individual is the condition for the free development of all (Marx/ Engels), although commonly, self-sacrifice and giving up of personal gain rather than freedom are associated with collaborative work. Murray Bookchin's hope for radically new configurations of society based on sharing and cooperation can inspire us to a positive active imagination of the future that impacts our collaborative experiments and explorations in the present online and face-to-face. But in the end we should view our collaborations and the tools that facilitate them as what they are without mistaking them for our utopian projections.

Trebor Scholz is a German-born, New York-based media artist, writer and organizer who works collaboratively and individually in the fields of media art, event-based cultural practice, new media arts education, and interactivist media cartography. In 2004 Scholz founded the Institute for Distributed Creativity (bio.critical-netcultures.net). He has taught new media, art history and theory at The University of Arizona, and The Bauhaus University, and is assistant professor and researcher at the Department of Media Study, SUNY at Buffalo. In spring 2005 the book "The Art of Online Collaboration" (editors Lovink/Scholz) will be published by oe/b_books, Berlin.