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FASHION NOW – ART FOREVER

The ONE and The MANY TOGETHER

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La Mission, from left, Anja Struck, Mandie O'Connell, Pablo Roman-Alcalá and Johannes Brandis

TOGETHER

Three P.M. on the eve of Gallery Weekend, the glitziest of Berlin's annual art events, and I'm sitting in the Kreuzberg living-room-cum-HQ of La Mission, a "Hedonist-Doomsday-Cult-Art-Collective" (their words). Cult Member Mandie O'Connell, a dramaturge and performer, is addressing a copy of their new EP "Time is Up". "We're sold out on Juno, the online record store," Pablo Roman-Alcalá, DJ and Chief Hedonist, grins. He's due to play at Soho House for the launch of the Marrakech Biennale later in the evening, and is concerned about how "art people sipping small glasses of white wine" will react to the music the former Bar 25 DJ plays.

Performing their post-Brechtian anarchist theatre in the basements of bars, galleries and vintage clothing stores in Neukölln and beyond, La Mission's hybrid practice refuses to be categorised. Comprised of three core members, O'Connell, Roman-Alcalá and Luis-Manuel Garcia, their practice spans techno production, performance art and hedonist theory. Rooted in Situationist practices, Nineties San Franciscan punk band The Nekkid Cult of Hickey, Andrzej Wirth's avant-garde theatre, and Garcia's investigations into "Affect and Intimacy at Electronic Dance Music Events," La Mission is many things, including a satirical doomsday cult, a music label, a magazine, an art collective, and a group of dance-music-lovers with a very dirty sense of humour.

The collective's musical output forms the departure point for their performances and builds on the ideas that they are talking about in clubs, bars and in Pablo's living room. "The music is the source text for the performance," he says. One of the cult's main inspirations is Up Against The Wall, Motherfuckers, a "physically violent but hilarious art gang" in New York, whose practice was based on Situationism.

The next performance will be durational, taking place over 12 hours in the cellar of a vintage store in Neukölln, with the audience watching via surveillance cameras. It will be an enactment of Mandie and Pablo's "creative bed-ins" but also an investigation of bundling, a colonial American tradition of courtship, where a courting couple, lying on a bed, is sewn into sacks so that they can't touch each other. "Working as a collective is a much richer, fruitful and more honest experience. I think being alone in your studio is selfish. [This way] you become a better artist," Mandie notes.

All of which begs a question: why do a dramaturge, a techno DJ and an academic specialising in the EasyJetSet come together to found an art cult and an avant-garde record label? They're hardly alone. Bored with traditional ways of making, showing and selling art, over the last five years numerous collectives have sprung into existence in Berlin. They want to change the way we perceive and consume art, moving away from art as a series of mute objects entombed in a gallery to a practice that speaks back and involves makers and audience alike. In short they want nothing less than to revolutionise the art world, bit by bit. Exhibiting friends and testing alternative ways of showing art that challenge academised curatorial exhibitions, collectives like La Mission are laboratories for new ways of making, showing and talking about art.

There is something in the air in Germany's artsy capital: "What we see at the moment is artists becoming collectives becoming project spaces and crossing borders," Maike Cruse, an early protagonist of the collective movement and now director of the ABC art fair, recently told Sleek. "That's apparent all over the world, but especially in Berlin."

Especially... and she's well placed to comment. As a co-founder, alongside Tjorg Douglas Beer, of Galerie im Regierungsviertel she has been involved in this hybrid process from its early days. Galerie im Regierungsviertel (now called Galerie Utopia) is an ongoing project dedicated to showing "art about daily life," inviting artists sourced from an extensive network of friends to collaborate on exhibitions. "I am an artist; I work with my colleagues, something which artists have always done. I'm not interested in what a curator is or does. I'm just making my own work with other people, and this means experimenting with different situations," Beer says.

Galerie Utopia's projects begin as a conversation between friends, an idea for collaboration independent of financial interests or the necessity of showing certain theoretical positions – a precursor, in many ways, for ISI, *ff* and other collectives working with alternative exhibition practices. Tongue firmly in cheek, the project

stages interventions which poke fun at the hierarchical, institutionalised art world, from installing a fake pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale ("Ginnungagap/Pavilion of Belief", 2007), to "curating" a booth at the Artissima art fair in Torino (also 2007). Beer also co-produced a biennale in Kreuzberg, entitled "Ayran and Yoga", in 2011 and is well-known as the initiator of the Forgotten Bar project, a tiny bar off Schönleinstraße which hosted over 200 exhibitions and 2,000 works between 2008 and 2011, with nightly changing exhibitions.

It doesn't end in Kreuzberg: in the Prater bar in Prenzlauer Berg, I meet the nine members of ISI. This collective, founded in 2010, are dedicated to realising exhibitions in "un-locations" – underneath bridges, in cemeteries or in abandoned orchards. Each time they assemble a cast of fifty to a hundred friends and acquaintances, "to make better art". Berlin plays a central role for them, and by using the fabric of the city itself as a gallery a different aesthetic is created for each exhibition.

All members of ISI have their individual artistic practice: they are painters (Lutz Braun, Patrick Alt, Claudia Zweifel), sculptors and video artists. But the greater ISI organisation allows them to experiment with an alternative form of art-making and to create something greater than the sum of its parts, with a greater remit. One of their ambitions is to "test the limits of public space", to investigate what is possible in terms of using and inhabiting space which is nominally private but publicly accessible, such as when they use a parking garage as display space. ("Merhakaisi", 2012, realised in Helsinki). The only traces left of their exhibitions are the photographs on their Tumblr, berlinisiburning, and their exhibitions are, they say, "not about exhibiting people – we want to free art from physical spaces and make it interact with the city. They deliberately eschew text, being uninterested in academised approaches. Text, to them, often overpowers the artwork, and it is precisely the irrationality of artistic practice that they want to draw out in their open-air installations.

Meanwhile, the city as material forms the basis of Invisible Playground's work. A few days later, I'm sitting in their office in Kreuzberg, part of the decaying Mehringplatz complex, where cheap restaurants and welfare offices make up the neighbouring tenants. The office is full of pool noodles, rubber balls and complex diagrams detailing new games ideas are attached to the wall, and Sebastian Quack, who co-founded the collective in 2009, is describing their concept of urban games to me.

Invisible Playground's members are a diverse bunch, ranging from philosophers to musicians, programmers and set designers (Quack himself is a cultural theorist and programmer). Invisible Playground has its roots in street theatre and performance art, and has evolved into a complex multi-layered approach of generating new urban narratives. U-Bahn passengers are used as roulette numbers and new experiences are inscribed into the "mundanity of urban perception," as Quack says. Their site-specific pieces have been part of summer music festivals, art festivals (Copenhagen, 2012) as well as being used for attempts at urban regeneration – they were hired by the city of Mülheim an der Ruhr in an attempt to inject some life into a town centre left destitute by ill-planned property development (did it work? "Possibly on an individual level," he says.)

I'M NOT INTO JUST CRITICISING THE STATUS QUO, YOU HAVE TO GENERATE NEW THINGS YOURSELF. IF ENOUGH PEOPLE JOIN IN, WE CAN AT LEAST CREATE A SMALL FREE SPACE, AN AUTONOMOUS ZONE, AND SOME BREATHING ROOM

MATHILDE TER HEIJNE, ARTIST AND *ff* MEMBER

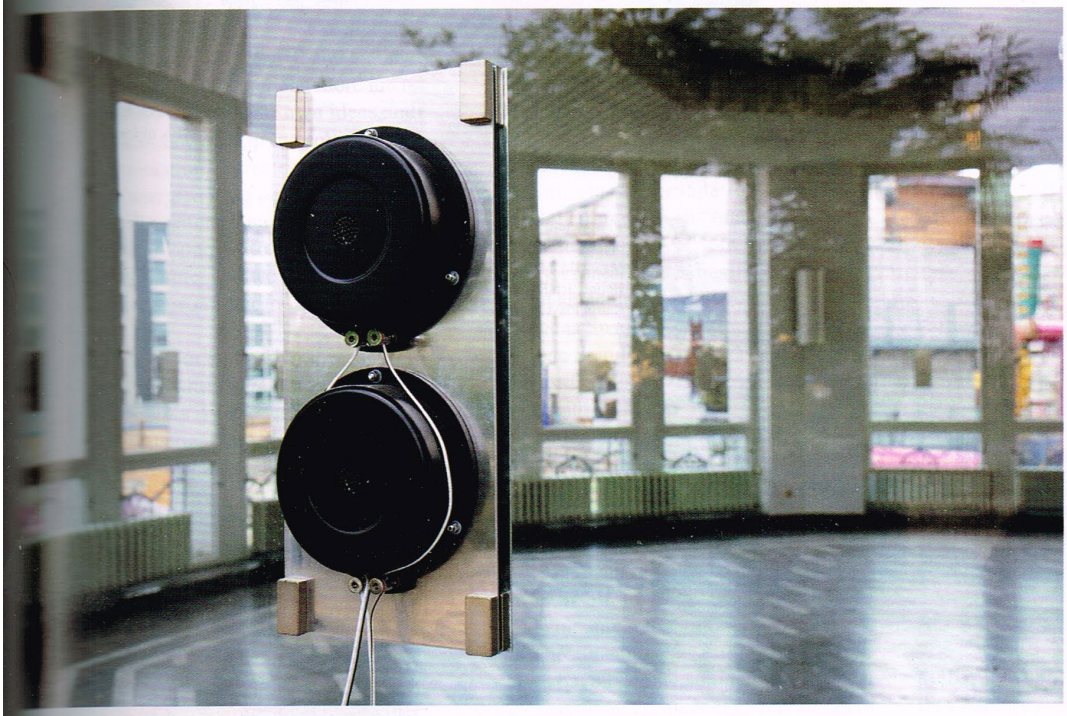
BACK TOWARDS UTOPIA

Collectives such as these and plenty of others dedicate themselves to providing alternative methods of exhibiting and to reframing the institutional networks of art. Rather than frantic air-kissing at the mega-events which characterise the art calendar, these are localised exhibitions, based on friendships, networks and the desire to collaborate on and show each others' work. In both Galerie Utopia's and ISI's opinion, the display and selection of artworks, whether in an institutional or more informal context has, for too long, been left in the hands of non-artists.

Rather than focusing on the artwork itself, exhibitions have dedicated themselves to illustrating certain theoretical points. Above all, the Nineties figure of the peripatetic super-curator as embodied by Klaus Biesenbach, Nicholas Bourriaud or Hans-Ulrich Obrist is under attack. The critic Lucy Lippard writes: "Artists have an unprecedented kind of control over their own production, but most lose it immediately in the post-production phase. They lose control not only of the object, but of its objective." This is a key motivation for collective practices.

What's more, the institutional art world is sitting up and taking notice of these alternative art histories and non-narratives. Galerie Utopia has organised exhibitions at the Tate Modern and now the Palais de Tokyo and the Galerie der Gegenwart in Hamburg focusing on Greek artists Beer met in Athens, his second home ("Berlin's great, but no-one's a fan of the nine-month winters", he remarks drily).

Das Numen, from left: Andreas Greiner, Felix Julien Charriere and Markus Hoffmann



Das Numen Sonor, Installation view, Schinkelpavillion, Berlin, April 2013

DAS NUMEN

This practice of artist-organised exhibitions may not be particularly new – artists have shown their peers since the days of impressionism, most notably through the Société des Artistes Indépendants, founded in 1884 by Odilon Redon and Georges Seurat among others, with the aim of showing progressive works overlooked by the more staid narratives embodied in academy exhibition practices. But it is vital: collectives such as Galerie Utopia, *ff* and ISI continue in the vein, albeit with changing ideologies, and in so doing, the practices and habits of the avant-garde are sustained.

What does that mean? Developing alternative histories, creating new narratives – all of these elements form part of collective practice. And indeed, it can be seen as a form of utopia – a space away from the strictures of both the market and the requirements forced on artists by curatorial practices – which has in the view of some artists and critics withered away under the current institutional and economic framework.

Collective practice has retained a dedication to this utopianism, whether in testing the limits of art institutions or producing art that refuses to surrender itself to the dictates of the market. Utopianism is now received as small, situated stories, in the words of La Mission "temporary utopias on the dance-floor".

"Depression isn't an interesting model for life, and so one has to introduce elements of idealism, like Galerie Utopia," says Tjorg Douglas Beer. "Art concerns itself with life, and conversation about it, and we wanted to focus on things that were important," La Mission agree. "It's important to find a way to demand a better present. One of these ways is Utopianist gestures, events, spaces, which include nightclubs and raves etc where a world can be rehearsed and enacted, which is attached to the question of why the world isn't like this already."

WORKING AS A COLLECTIVE IS A MUCH RICHER, FRUITFUL AND MORE HONEST EXPERIENCE. YOU BECOME A BETTER ARTIST. I THINK BEING ALONE IN YOUR STUDIO IS SELFISH

MANDIE O'CONNELL, LA MISSION

DISSOLVING IDENTITIES

Collectives emerged as a feature of the 1980s art scene, often dedicated to political causes such as AIDS activism, feminism or racial and social equality. Group Material were key figures in this scene and have, in many ways, shaped contemporary collective practice as it works in Berlin. Comprised of Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Tim Rollins (KOS) and many others – shifting memberships are a key feature of collectives – Group Material were active in New York City between 1979 and 1996, forming a counter-figure to the more commercial practices of the 1980s art world. Their post-Conceptual practice encompassed producing alternative platforms for the display of art, pioneering the practice of artists as curators. Commissioned in 1985 by the New Museum to produce an exhibition, they asked 200 people, artists and non-artists, to contribute a 12 x 12 inch piece, which was shown alongside album covers and magazine ads. Much of Group Material's focus lay on investigating the boundaries between art and non-art, rejecting the role of artists as producers. They thus created "other spaces" or "heteropias", using Michel Foucault's concept of places where "real sites of culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" ("Des Espaces Autres", 1967). This legacy survives in practices such as Galerie Utopia and ISI. Lucy Lippard wrote that "a deep frustration with the limited functions and outlets for art in Western culture and a sense of alienation from audiences is why most of us are activists [in a collective]."

Of course, artists' collectives do not only seek alternative forms of displaying and showing art. Collectivist practice has traditionally been a site of resistance to the confines imposed on individual practice: it's at the heart of Bernadette Corporation's claim that founding a corporation is "the perfect alibi for not having to fix an identity," thus escaping the imperative, felt by many artists, of having to establish an "artistic brand" and easily recognisable mode of artistic production.

Many collective members with individual practice refer to it as a variant of a day job: the collective action, they feel, is where they can be more experimental. "What's nice about this constellation is that it's not your work or brand that you have to promote. I'm a bit sick of being this brand, this person," the artist and co-founder of the *ff* collective, Mathilde ter Hejne, notes. "The art world revolves around getting your name on things, you have to get credit, and if you don't you start worrying about your Artfacts and Artnet ranking, and your sales. How do you value yourself?" she says. Collective participation creates another value system that is based on individual values and values that are important in the community. "I'm not into just criticising the status quo, you have to generate new things yourself. If enough people join in, we can at least create a small free space, an autonomous zone, and some breathing room," she says.

This approach is an intrinsic critique at the modern myth of the genius ensconced in his garret, notions of artistic originality, and the production of "unique" objects. As Lippard writes, "in the art world, a powerful artist is one whose name can be used. Name, not art. ('I bought a Starr,' like 'I bought a piece of Starr,' dangerously close to 'I bought Starr.')". In the practice of La Mission, Invisible Playground, FORT and Das Numen (we'll come to them shortly) as well as the better-known collectives Claire Fontaine and Bernadette Corporation, the ambition is to create an art that is greater than the sum of its parts. "Somehow, using the name Claire Fontaine is more precise than just signing the names of the people implicated in the work because what we produce is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the sum of our individual practices," they said in an interview with Bernadette Corporation's John Kelsey.

For the Berlin-based FORT collective, which comprises Anna Jandt, Jenny Kropp and Alberta Niemann, the work should precede the artist. "In the beginning, we just wanted to retreat behind the work, and just give ourselves whatever name the current project just happened to

have. The former curator of the Kunstwerke, Susanne Pfeffer, told us it would be less confusing if we adopted a name, and so we called ourselves FORT, after a childhood Playmobil toy," they say. "Often we can't tell who had the original idea for a piece.

"And thus the notion of authorship is dissolved."

IT'S BETTER WHEN WE'RE TOGETHER

Collective practice is not simply a linear amplifier in terms of the amount of work invested, but can also manifest Brian Eno's concept of "Scenius" where individual ideas act as amplifiers.

I'm sitting in the studio space of Andreas Greiner, Julian Charrière, Felix Kiessling and Markus Hoffmann, collectively known as Das Numen, in an old brewery in southern Schöneberg. There's an outdoor Goa party going on in a neighbouring field, and fragments of trance drift in through the open windows. Das Numen was founded in 2008 when the members collaborated on a project for the .hbc space as part of their programme requirement for Olafur Eliasson's Institut für Raumforschung. The project was entitled Das Numen, and as they say, "as four, you create larger and more interesting works. We all have our own ideas and worlds, and when they overlap and collide, there is a plus-plus situation, it creates a very heady mixture. This was also a big part of our time at the Institut für Raumforschung, where we were all participants as opposed to students – there was a big round table, and we learned how to create ideas in a group and how to develop them."

Das Numen's works are site-specific and have a temporal character; all that is left after the exhibition closes is the documentation and the observers' experiences. "We are less driven by economic considerations, the Numen installations don't incorporate the element of saleability of our individual practice. They're more process-oriented as opposed to being objects in their own right."

But really, what can collectives do that individual artists can't? Why choose this elaborate mode of practice with intimations of long nights spent arguing over projects, and the organisational hassles of getting nine people together in the same room.

Here's why:

- Working as a collective, with members originating from different practices or genres, allows bridges to be built and connections forged which would otherwise remain undiscovered.
- Collectives bridge gaps and reach out to other modes of thinking. For their last project, "Das Numen Sonor", they worked with the Geophysical Institute in Potsdam, using the "noise" from their seismic stations that they normally filter out as disturbance when they are monitoring earthquakes, the noise of the city, as basis for the work. "It was about realising the tremors of the city of Berlin, as acoustic, sensual experience. We attached these amplifiers to the windows of the Schinkelpavillon, a GDR-era building, transcending the separation between inside and outside," they say.
- Practice is hybrid, often non-object related, site-specific and process-based, leaving little or no trace once the action is complete. It is at once performance, installation and action, drawing on elements from relational aesthetics (as in La Mission's performances or Das Numen's performative sculpture, where the observer is a key to activating the piece), Minimal Art and Conceptual practices. Subjects and mediums are so varied it is hard to distil a core theme for collective production. La Mission: "We are being approached by people who have a great deal of vision, like Nadim (Samman, Director of the gallery Import Projects), who want to foster things that are on the fringes of a number of genres." Samman showed their second performance, Performance/ART 002: Common Revilings, an "irrepressible testimony on collective and individual identity, the valid and necessary pursuit of Utopia, and the wonders and perils of the human condition," at Import, drawing La Mission into the visual art world.
- Due to the hybrid, interdisciplinary nature of most collective practice, here too borderlines are transgressed and rendered meaningless. Bernadette Corporation sited their practice on "brand-hacking", a reflection of the social turn in Nineties art. They created a clothes label, wrote a novel about the museum guard-cum-model Reena Spaulings and founded a gallery (Reena Spaulings Fine Art) among other things. La Mission mixes academic hedonism with avant-garde theatre, performance art and techno in a heady Gesamtkunstwerk. Their performances and productive practices exceed the boundaries of traditional art. How does art function when the performance takes place in the basements of cafes, vintage clothes stores or in the street itself, and how are a record label and zine integrated into the whole?
- In a post-medium art world, where boundaries have become so open as to appear meaningless, complacency has emerged as the greatest challenge to innovation, be it in terms of artistic production or on the part of the viewer. Collectives seek to alter this status quo, whether through creating ephemeral art that disappears into memory and documentation once the show is over, or by inventing exhibition practices that subvert ways of looking at art.

MEANWHILE BACK IN NEUKÖLLN

Ultimately, perhaps, collectives can be seen as an attempt to change the course of art history from within, to provide a narrative beyond the accepted canon.

"How can we articulate and create an alternative art history?" is what the group *ff* are asking. Eleven core members, all women, have set themselves the task of articulating alternative art histories. They do this both by drawing attention to women artists they believe have been passed over in an art world which is still dominated by men, and by creating new art histories through their programme of exhibitions.

And they are successful with it: their first exhibition in Berlin at the Galerie im Körnerpark, Erogenous Zones, drew 3,000 visitors to a far-flung corner of Neukölln, and commanded coverage from both mainstream and art press. *ff* wanted to articulate eroticism from the perspective of female artists, and thus attacked two prevailing themes in art: firstly, that old chestnut of the "male gaze" and the objectification of women's bodies throughout large spans of art history, and secondly the taboo, originating with feminist practices of the 1970s, of women artists creating images of desirable women. (Remember the furore that Lynda Benglis incited when she published a photograph of her oiled, naked body, holding a big latex dildo in a 1974 issue of Artforum?).

One of the key pieces of their current Temporary Autonomous Zone 2 is a table, its legs stuck in Wellington Boots, stacked with back issues of art magazines, featuring works (all of women) by Poussin, Hans Holbein, Ingres and others – the classical narrative of art history, if you will. Entitled "Hans Holbein, We Are Watching You!", it is a collaborative piece by Charlotte Cullinan, Jeanine Richards and Katrin Plavcak. The magazines are defaced, portraits and images inserted as collage pieces.

Why the wellies? "Well," says Katrin Plavcak, "it's how we feel about a lot of art history: no room to move; stuck."

"It's about creating a new kind of history apart from the established canon, about counteracting suppression," ter Heijne, a professor at the University of Kassel, says.

The collective, which consists of Alice Cohen, Delia Gonzalez, Mathilde ter Heijne, Antje Majewski, Katrin Plavcak, Nina Prader, Jen Ray, Lisa Ruyter, Juliane Solmsdorf, Melissa Steckbauer and Magda Tothova, say they are not interested in defining any particular notion of feminism. Instead they came together around a shared idea of founding an artist group where they collaborated on and exhibited artworks.

"We're interested in collaborating with other women artists. Being alone in the studio isn't enough and we need solidarity and exchange. To see whether it's possible to create art together and to have a common language. We wanted to create more space for us, to enjoy art, and to operate outside the received canon."

Perhaps that's the most interesting reason for collective practices today: to operate outside a received remit, to reject grand narratives in favour of situated stories.

And in the end, to make dynamic, engaging art.