

“DIT: The Collaborative Nature of Everything”

Sue Spaid, PhD

A few years ago, I mentioned to artist/philosopher Mark Harris that I wanted to title an anthology of my philosophy papers Teamwork, which he highly discouraged, since he considers teamwork more an “institutional directive” than some predilection to team up. In recent years, the term DIY has morphed into DIT (Doing it Together), which I prefer, since “do it yourself” doubles as libertarian sophistry. Even if “making things happen” means not awaiting permission from others, we do little “all by ourselves” save perhaps brushing our teeth. Even so, it sometimes seems like we’ve been left to do everything ourselves, like the little red hen who can’t find anyone to help her make the bread, yet plenty of eaters turn up as it exits the oven. In truth, we hardly do anything that is not already in reaction to something, so whatever is antecedent is effectively linked to the present. I even consider spectators part of this picture, as they typically relay their art experiences to future publics, which allows an artwork’s meaning to shift over time. While movies heavily depend on audiences to draw more people to view them, moviegoers cannot alter a film’s content, though they certainly expand upon its significance. With visual art, spectators modify artworks’ contents, effectively influencing how others perceive and thus experience them. With visual art, the public arena determines art’s future.

I imagine that most artists’ (and most curators’) first couple of exhibitions occur in artist-run spaces, aka the “alternative scene.” In 1998, I asked Los Angeles artist Dave Muller, who hosted “Three Day Weekend” (1994-2004), what was so “alternative” about “alternative spaces,” especially those that serve as launching pads. Muller responded, “The ‘alternative’ is the alternative to doing nothing,” and I quite agree. While some artists make a career of exhibiting in artist-run spaces, others go in and out, using artist-run spaces to re-energize their practices, or to try something experimental that might not fly in a commercial venue or institutional setting. One well-known artist rewarded a home gallery that he admired by exhibiting an artwork that already had a buyer, enabling the artists to build new studios. It’s both thoughtless and heartless that gallerists routinely scrub such formative shows from artists’ CVs.

In revisiting Cincinnati’s millennial alternative scene, “20 Years Ago Today” harkens back to an era when artist-run spaces were flourishing. Who can forget the Arts Consortium (1972-2011), Semantics (1993-2016), DiLeia (1996-2001), Warsaw Projects (1998-2005), Sanctum Santorum (1998-2001), Volk (2000), SSNOVA (2001-2003), Publico (2003-2008), Autumedia (2003-2013), and Aisle (2007-2012)? While selecting artworks for “20 Years Ago Today,” the curators noticed five themes: 1) art made from domestic materials such as cardboard, cinder blocks, handkerchiefs, home videos, model homes, roofing paper, sand, and yarn; 2) humorous nods to yesteryear’s African dot painting, Art Academy staff, Donald Judd, Bruce Nauman, Kelley Walker, and NFTs; 3) collective artworks, such that participants provided input regarding haircuts and fantasy vacations; 4) objects that convey making/moving/labor such as architectural plans, chess boards, gestural abstraction, thumbprints, quilts, and tools; and 5) art inspired by climate change and everyday activities such as construction, dress-up, games, gardening, makeup, shopping, sports, television, and therapy. That art is so entangled with our everyday lives further demonstrates the collaborative nature of everything!

