

# BLACK COLLECTIVITIES

## An Introduction



**Cauleen Smith**, Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band, Rich South High School, Garfield, Green Line Stop, Chicago, March 4, 2013

Huey Copeland and Naomi Beckwith

**W**e heard it before we saw it. As we neared the University of Chicago's Arts Incubator, we could make out the strains of Sun Ra's "Space Is the Place" growing louder, first the horns and then voices raised in unison. When we finally rounded the corner, the spectacle came into full view: the Rich South High School Marching Band, decked out in their red-white-and-blue best, had occupied the center of Washington Boulevard for an impromptu musical performance. Police conducted traffic, onlookers swayed to the rhythm, and passersby—on the el and on the street—shouted greetings or stopped to wonder. Together for the twenty-minute duration of the performance, we not only vivified and made intimate a sprawling Chicago intersection but also comprised a jubilant motley collective united by our interest and pleasure in the eruption of singing, signing black bodies into the everyday.

This performance, orchestrated by the artist Cauleen Smith, was the closing event of "Black Collectivities," a conference that unfolded during the day at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and that had begun the night before at Northwestern University's Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art with a screening and discussion of The Otolith Group's 2012 film *The Radiant*, an exploration of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster the previous year. These bookends—executed, respectively, by a lone American filmmaker and a British conceptual duo—begin to suggest the multiplicity of phenomena that black aesthetic collaboration has addressed as well as the numerous forms that it might take. Like the current issue, the conference brought together a renowned international roster of curators, critics, historians, and artists, who also included Romi Crawford, John Corbett, Theaster Gates, George E. Lewis, Rick Lowe, Elvira Dyan-gani Ose, Cauleen Smith, Blake Stimson, and Claire Tancons. With audience members from across the globe, the conference presenters engaged in a series of dialogues that served as the locus of an exploratory research seminar and as a springboard for the emergent discourse around questions of race, nation, and collectivity in contemporary artistic practice.

In the last two decades, collectivism—much

like the concepts of participation, relationality, and DIY aesthetics, with which it is often and problematically intertwined—has become a key term in global artistic discourse. For cultural practitioners of various stripes, collective practice has offered an increasingly viable framework that defies art history's usual emphases on the singular autonomous author and that reframes the relationship between art's objects, makers, and audiences. Like the earlier political and artistic collectives that inspired them, from the surrealists to the Black Panthers, contemporary collaborative formations often aim to resist the commodification of art, to forward a shared liberatory project, and to elucidate new models of art making, community, and citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

As evidenced by the work of Smith and The Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjali Sagar), black practitioners are no exception, whether based in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, or North America. The conference engaged with such key art-world practices as well as those emerging from musical, performative, and institutional contexts, thereby offering an unprecedented opportunity to consider the varying forms black collaborative practices have assumed and to critically explore their relationship to and difference from hegemonic Western paradigms and histories. For while an increasing scholarly literature canvasses the collective phenomenon, this discourse rarely explores the specificity of work by black practitioners, let alone charts their debts to previous groups, such as Chicago's own AfriCOBRA, which are finally beginning to get their critical due.<sup>2</sup>

Such racialized elisions are routine in art-world practice—whether historical, curatorial, or critical—though in the case of collectivity these oversights are particularly glaring, since, as the literary scholar Frances Smith Foster once put it, "creative cooperation" is "as African American as sweet potato pie."<sup>3</sup> Yet this is more than just business as usual with higher stakes. The slighting of race in mainstream artistic discourse on collective practice—with a few notable exceptions, such as the always prescient curatorial and theoretical work of Okwui Enwezor—overlooks how the exclusion of blackness serves as the suppressed ground on which white

subjectivity, institutions, and social formations are erected.<sup>4</sup> It also fails to countenance the particular challenges that black folks have faced in attempting to come together, given the frequent injunctions, both political and juridical, against any form of black collectivity, especially of an oppositional stripe.

Exhibiting institutions, for instance, have the luxury of working directly with artists in developing and presenting contemporary projects, itself a form of collaboration. Yet often, even with the best of intentions, curatorial projects place black collective practices in an overdetermined politicized frame or ignore how such art unwittingly reproduces the logic of the neoliberal capitalist service economy.<sup>5</sup> Rather than place the burden of criticality on the form of the collective itself, what is needed is an approach that understands the cultural specificity of forms and their inextricable relation to the production of cultural difference.

By not considering the specificity of forms of black collaboration, the discourse not only risks missing the chance to have a more complex understanding of how racialization deforms the social field but also sidesteps a rich set of black cultural traditions—filmmaking, protests, marching bands, and carnivals—that might broaden and reframe our tried-and-true genealogies of conceptual, performative, and political art. Indeed, the reframing of such genealogies is arguably more important than ever in light of the current “postmedium condition”—to borrow a phrase from the art historian Rosalind Krauss—in which public works, performance, video, and all manner of “high” and “low” cultural practices intersect with and cross-fertilize each other both within and beyond the walls of the institution.<sup>6</sup> This condition is one that contemporary scholars at times take for granted, forgetting that a specific set of historical developments allowed nontraditional visual arts to be included in the canon and become prime sites of contestation in a public sphere in which blackness remains a persistent if problematic presence.

“Black Collectivities” is meant to provide a platform to right these exclusions, past and present, and to create a record of black collaborative practice today that will enable a rethinking of what constitutes collectivity and relationality, the human and the everyday. Just as important, we hope that this special issue will enable a deeper appreciation of

the differences and affinities among black collective modes of working in light of varying national, ideological, cultural, and artistic contexts. In particular, the contributions gathered here consider how collaboration puts pressure on notions of blackness based on race or even African descent rather than structural positionality; how black collective practice might be narrated on the basis of aesthetic affinity rather than shared oppression; how forms of black sociality reinvent, invert, and contest both the established social order and its white discontents; how collectives actually come together and fall apart politically and affectively; how new understandings of collective practice may push beyond familiar latter-day forms of institutional critique and complicate the notion of political intervention both inside and outside the institution; and how we must turn to fields beyond art history in developing new models and frameworks that help us understand and narrate the ethical, aesthetic, and historical stakes of the collective as process and product, spectacle and underground, group and identity, persona and corporation.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the symposium and the special issue are meant to reignite exchanges about the ties that link black subjects in an era when all forms of communitarian identity are increasingly frayed and to model possibilities for the development of new forms of black art and organizing. Accordingly, in organizing the conference and editing its proceedings, we have taken the dialogic as a model in order to give voice to the overlapping range of positions, tones, contestations, and ways of speaking that arise when such diverse and diversely interested participants come together. Although many of the contributions are intended to stand on their own, the issue opens itself most fully when followed from beginning to end as a single contrapuntal work. Some of the texts read as straight-up scholarly essays; others are self-reflective assessments of the collaborative process; still others must be viewed as performative artistic statements if not artworks in and of themselves.

There are, however, certain common thematic concerns that emerge across the contributors’ various considerations of the affective and structural coordinates of black collective practice in film, music, visual art, social practice, and political mobilization. Time and again in these pages, there is the sense

of the black collective's functioning as a kind of apotropaic feint, a means of protection and defense that allows its participants to refuse capture by the market and the state, those white supremacist formations that have together marked blackness as a site of value productive of both radical dereliction and tremendous wealth. As such, black collectivity now is not so much a static formation as a state of being, a mode of becoming-together whose temporal unfolding is contingent, provisional, and always under threat of erasure but not without voice.

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### Notes

This special issue and the conference from which it emerged would not have been possible without considerable financial and logistical support from a whole village of institutions and individuals. We offer our profoundest thanks to our generous sponsors: first and foremost the Myers Foundations, which provide the major support for visual arts programming at Northwestern University that is, by stipulation, always free and open to the public. We could not have pulled the conference together without the further assistance of the staff at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, the Northwestern University Department of Art History, the University of Chicago's Arts and Public Life Initiative, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities, the Northwestern University Black Arts Initiative, the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, the Northwestern University Department of African American Studies, and the Richard and Mary L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry. We would also like to single out for thanks Madeleine Grynsztejn, Erika Hanner, Joe Iverson, Heidi Reitmaier, and Alia Walston at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Theaster Gates, Allison Glenn, Monika Szweczyk, and Mercedes Sahagun Zavala at the University of Chicago; Jesús Escobar, Luke Fidler, and Anthony Opal at the Northwestern University Department of Art History; and Mimi Brody, Lisa Corrin, and Judy Koon at the

Block Museum. Special notes of thanks go to Corrin for her tireless support of and enthusiasm for this project and to S. Hollis Clayson of the Kaplan Institute, which generously provided funding for the conference and the present publication. We wish to express our gratitude to the editors of *Nka* for taking on this project, especially Chika Okeke-Agulu, whose vision made it possible, and to Jennifer Savran Kelly, who masterfully shepherded it toward publication. A final note of thanks to the audience at the conference and to our students, who together made a black collective to which we are deeply indebted: Marissa Baker, Antawan Byrd, Patricia DaCosta, Xinran Guo, Henry Hamilton, Chester Hanks, Jake Leveton, Arianne Milheim, Aisha Motlani, Julia Oswald, Jared Richardson, Maia Safani, and Adeze Wilford. For a full accounting of the conference schedule, visit [www2.mcachicago.org/event/event-past-10](http://www2.mcachicago.org/event/event-past-10).

1. The discourse on collective practice is now voluminous, but we have found that the following recent texts provide particularly useful points of departure: Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn," in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, ed. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog, 2007), 15–31; Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Irit Rogoff, "Production Lines," [collabarts.org/?p=69](http://collabarts.org/?p=69) (accessed July 31, 2013); and Blake Stimson and Greg Sholette, eds., *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
2. More than forty years after its founding, AfriCOBRA is attracting long-overdue attention discursively, museologically, and curatorially, as underlined by *Nka*, no. 29 (2011) and no. 30 (2012); by the acquisition of major holdings of their work by the Brooklyn Museum; and by a series of exhibitions in 2013 at Chicago's South Side Community Art Center, Logan Center for the Arts, and DuSable Museum of African American History.
3. Frances Smith Foster, "Creative Collaboration: As African American as Sweet Potato Pie," in *Post-bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877–1919*, ed. Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 17–34. For one attempt to engage and critique the elision of blackness in hegemonic artistic discourse, see Huey Copeland, "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 480–97.
4. See Okwui Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork: Protocols of Community in the Work of Le Group Amos and Huit Facettes," in Stimson and Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism*, 223–51. For a related exploration of the intersection between forms of white institutional and black cultural practice, see Huey Copeland, "Dark Mirrors: Theaster Gates and *Ebony*," *Artforum* 52, no. 2 (2013): 222–29.
5. For a related critique, see Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," *October*, no. 140 (2012): 91–112.
6. See Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).
7. In this vein, the work of Fred Moten has been of invaluable import in thinking with and beyond the protocols of art history when considering black politics, aesthetics, and sociality. See his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) as well as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Autonomedia, 2013).