

AGAINST COMPETITION

MARC FISCHER



ILLUSTRATED BY KIONE KOCHI

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Recently I received an email from a student in Ireland. He had discovered an interview in which I discussed an old project that sounded extremely similar to something he had been working on for a year and was about to exhibit. This discovery sent him into a "mini-crisis" and he wrote to see if I might share my thoughts on the situation. I sent this student printed materials from my work, as I strongly feel that artists who are doing similar work should make an effort to know each other, share knowledge and perhaps even work together. There is no reason why two variations of the same idea can't happily co-exist.

So much of the way that the art world is structured favors competition. Grants are competitive. Art schools stage student competitions. Students compete for funding. Hundreds compete for a single art school teaching position. Professors compete with other professors. Artists compete with artists – stealing ideas instead of sharing them, or using copyright laws to guard against thoughtful re-use. Artists compete for shows in a limited number of exhibition spaces instead of finding their own ways to exhibit outside of these competitive venues. Artists conceal





opportunities from their friends as a way of getting an edge up on the capital-driven competition.

Gallerists compete with other gallerists and curators compete with curators. Artists who sell their work compete for the attention of a limited number of collectors. Collectors compete with other collectors to acquire the work of artists.

This is a treadmill made from decomposing shit that is so devoid of nutrients that even its compost won't allow anything fresh to grow. We need something better to run on. Some artists are bypassing competitive approaches in their practice, suggesting possibilities for a different cultural climate. Since the 1960s, numerous artists have made works that take the form of strategies, proposals, gestures and instructions. While these works are not usually presented as invitations for others to reinterpret, making variations in a similar spirit still has the potential to yield rewarding results.

Ideas are not necessarily used up just because they have entered the art historical canon (and many good projects remain unfamiliar to most audiences). This older soil remains fertile for new plantings.



More art projects could be created with the built-in understanding that they can be freely re-made or given a new twist by others in the future – like classical music compositions that still get played two hundred years after the composer died. Take the example of the late composer John Cage's three movement composition "4' 33"". It was first performed by David Tudor in 1952. This work has since been given many reinterpretations over the years by artists as diverse as Frank Zappa, The BBC Symphony Orchestra and The Melvins. The work finds new meaning with different performers, contexts, times and places.

Redundancies, repetitions and overlaps are often neglected because they complicate the bigger picture and show art to be the much larger social mess that it really is. We don't have to run away from repetitions.

Since 2001, the Philadelphia-based collaborative group Basekamp has been doing lectures, discussions, events and project planning around the theme of redundancy in the visual arts. Late last year they co-organized an event series titled "Making Room for Redundancy" with Lars Fischer (no relation to the author). They have been dreaming up and building models for terminals where the viewer could enter an idea and see all of the overlapping permutations of how it has been explored before. Basekamp recently gave a lecture titled simply "I am a Collaborative Artist" at the Infest: Artist-Run Culture conference in Vancouver. For artists who are open to working with others, such conferences can be a good place to strengthen or develop new friendships, fueling new collaborations or broader inclusion in pre-existing projects.

Another mutually-supportive practice: the French artist Céline Duval enjoys a prolific collaboration with the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann, who is



about thirty years her senior. This began when Céline contacted him wanting to help with raw material for his work and now they publish books together. They collaborate on equal footing despite large differences in age, experience and success in the art world. The viewer must untangle the mingling voices in these co-authored works, ask questions, or just accept the hybrid and enjoy the resulting complexity.

Making participatory artworks can open up your practice and build a loose community in the process. Since 1997, Chicago-based artist Melinda Fries has been running the website ausgang.com. Ausgang is essentially an artwork in web form that contains the work of various contributors (many of whom are not artists). Melinda creates categories that are of personal interest (examples: "Living Situations," "Things In The Road," "Bus Stories"). Contributors then flesh out these themes by submitting stories, images, or projects that are suitable for the web. The site is updated seasonally. Melinda's project is enriched and expanded by others and the contributors get a platform for their work that will be seen by many viewers.

The people who participate often send out emails promoting the site and their contributions that are included. The site is not a flimsy catch-all for anything and everything. Melinda functions as an editor, but she allows a very broad range of ways for one to participate. In the interest of disclosure, I contribute to ausgang.com regularly, but perhaps you should too?

While there is a joy in finding people with shared affinities, establishing communication and friendships with artists who have shared interests and ideas is not a retreat from the challenge of making tough critical art. Who better to kick your ass a little than your collaborators? The disposable, vague, or one-liner qualities



in so much recent art reveals a lack of sufficient peer-to-peer ass-kicking. Collaborative projects by their nature insist on constant feedback and criticism.

Arguing against competition is not necessarily a vote in favor of an idealized world of shiny happy people holding hands - some of the most productive collaborations can have a lot of tension and disagreement. The fascinating documentary "Some Kind of Monster" shows Metallica band members and co-founders James Hetfield and Lars Ulrich in exchanges that are sometimes so lacking in civility that at one point Ulrich is reduced to getting in Hetfield's face and screaming: "FUUUUCCCKKKK!!!" In an additional scene on the DVD, Ulrich admits: "I'm afraid of changing what has worked. Twenty years of hatred sold one hundred million records."

One of the great tempestuous working relationships in film history was that of director Werner Herzog and actor Klaus Kinski. In Herzog's documentary "My Best Fiend", Kinski's behavior on the set during one film was so angering that the director seriously contemplated murdering him. When Klaus Kinski wrote his autobiography, he reportedly gave Herzog advance notice that he was going to trash the director in the book because he felt that attacking his friend would lead to increased sales. The two even collaborated in their mutual infuriation with each other but clearly, and more importantly, they pushed each other to perform better and make more ambitious and passionate films.

How can we build a stronger network among people with shared interests and values? In a recent talk that we hosted at Mess Hall in Chicago, curator Nato Thompson brought up the impressive and widespread networks that the hardcore punk music scene has crafted, where a band has a place to play and crash in nearly every major town. This is something he longs to see happen for experimental



art and cultural practices in every part of the U.S. - particularly those areas that are culturally under-served. An audience member noted, however, that part of what enabled the hardcore scene to do this so effectively is that there is a shared language that is easier to understand. People seem able to grasp the terms and aesthetics more easily. Music can circulate quickly and simply. It often has a bracing, visceral and emotional power; heady forms of art and critical theory are generally a little less catchy. You could listen to eight hardcore songs in the time it takes to read this essay.

Some online communities show promise. For the past couple years I've been frequenting a particularly hyperactive online music discussion group for obscure loud rock. The number of times the distant feel of the Internet breaks out into the real world on some of these sites is uncountable. When people attend concerts together often the next morning one person will write about it and another will post the photos they took and it all gets shared with thousands who couldn't be there. I've been offered places to stay in numerous cities based purely on my

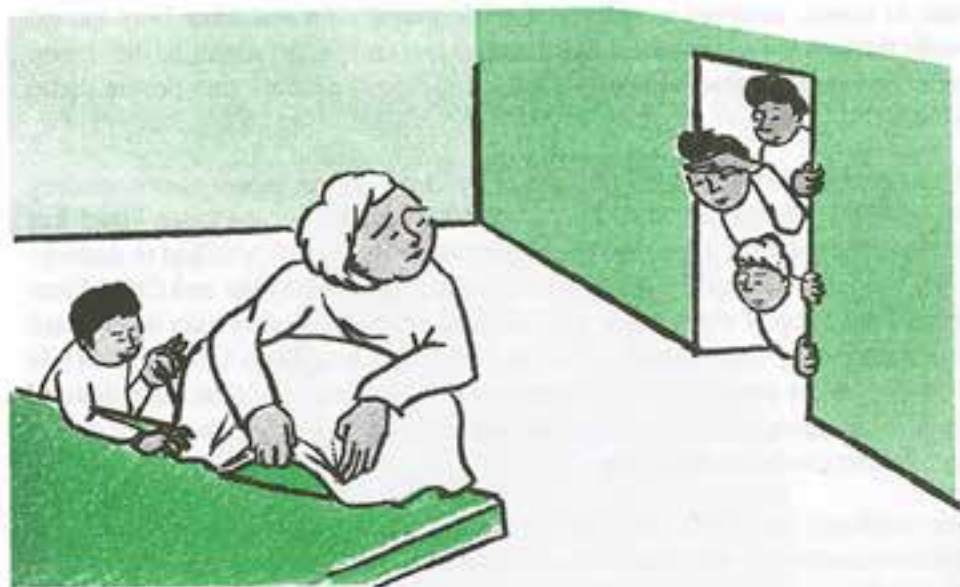
taste in music, received un-requested packages of CDs and have been loaned books through the mail. A band had their van and equipment stolen, so one forum member named Foetuscide quickly set up a Paypal account that people could donate to.

When Foetuscide was left homeless by Hurricane Katrina, people started sending her money at the Paypal account she originally created for the band. There has been endless support for a board member named EvilFanny who had to undergo brain surgery. A discussion thread about the merits of old Slayer and Celtic Frost records can happily share space with a thread where EvilFanny asks other board members if they know anything about going on Long Term Disability. While these big online communities are messy and filled with more than their share of knuckle-draggers, sexists, homophobes and right wing morons, the generosity of participants can be breathtaking.

The challenge for artists who want to build supportive networks like this is to find communication strategies that can help them connect to each other with the passion that music fans across the globe excel at. We need to make our emails to strangers whose art and ideas we care about resonate with that obsessive nerdy excitement that music geeks generate in their sleep. Art blogs are popping up all over Chicago but I have yet to see any become a truly action packed, socially dynamic online community where artists, curators, viewers, writers and every other kind of participant mixes it up and generates ideas that take real hold in the world. One of the oldest Chicago-centric discussion forums, Othergroup.net, sometimes goes for a month without a single post. In order for critical and experimental art networks to become stronger, and for audiences to grow, artists need to expand the range of ways we operate. When artists work with others, they complicate their practice and these collaborations often enrich everything they do. They organize shows and events that include other artists, write about other people's work and assist people with their creative endeavors. There is no reason why more artists – including those who have comparatively solitary studio practices, can't cultivate those skills in order to work more effectively with other people.

In the process, they learn to write, organize, publish, curate, educate and do anything else necessary to bolster support and dialogue for the ideas they value. More than anything, they learn to take the initiative and build something larger than themselves. In the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, artists could do this work on the government's dime at NEA-funded not-for-profit Alternative spaces.

Now that the money is gone and most of those spaces are no longer in existence, new methodologies need to be worked out. We need each other more than ever.



Working with others not only opens the individual artist to the resources, skills, criticisms, and ideas of their collaborator(s), but also frequently to those of the collaborator's peer group or network. This inevitably creates a larger audience for the finished work and sows the seeds for future collaborations with an even greater variety of people. Creating opportunities for others always results in more personal opportunities. When it becomes clear that you operate from a place of generosity, people become more generous with you – sometimes offering things like free use of equipment, huge discounts on printing and even free use of a storefront in Rogers Park (the location and arrangement that has kept Mess Hall going for over two years now). This approach may not result in a vacation home in Malibu or the opportunity to snort lines of coke off of prostitutes' asses with Jörg Immendorf, but is that really the reason you became an artist in the first place?

Working toward a global network where one creates opportunities and, in turn, can respond to limitless opportunities without the pressure to compete, allows for a more generous, diverse and open art practice. In these ways, one can break the isolation of being alone, defending a head-full of secret studio realizations that some kid in Ireland has probably already figured out anyway.

Note: In the spirit of this essay, a number of collaborators provided feedback. Thanks to: Brett Bloom, Melinda Fries, Terence Hannum, Brennan McGaffey, Scott Rigby and Dan S. Wang.

AFTERWORD

Against Competition was originally written for a short-lived journal from Chicago titled B.A.T. (the acronym changed meaning with each issue). The editors at the time were William Staples, Julia Marsh, Keri Butler, and Elijah Burgher. This essay appeared in issue number two in April, 2006.

B.A.T. was a modest photocopied publication with a print run of just a couple hundred copies, so the essay had a limited reach until Temporary Services, a group I'm a member of, uploaded a PDF version to our website. Since then the text has been downloaded thousands of times. It has also been included in other projects devoted to sharing critical writings such as aaaaarg.org and the artist Stephanie Syjuco's ongoing project "Free Texts: An Open Source Reading Room."

Temporary Services values printed publications and the organic circulation of writings through non-digital channels, so we have made *Against Competition* into its own booklet. The main text remains the same, but in place of two photos that were included in the B.A.T. version, we've invited the artist Kione Kochi to design this booklet and create new illustrations that appear throughout.

The following are some new thoughts, and updates to some of the examples mentioned in the original text:

The collaboration of Céline Duval and Hans-Peter Feldmann ended, but not before they completed eight publications together. Melinda Fries closed her project ausgang.com after a decade of seasonal updates. Likewise, Mess Hall closed its doors after ten rent-free years, when the owner of the building decided to put the storefront to a different use. The online underground music forum I wrote about ended several years ago when the site owners (whose main business is selling records), pulled the plug on the forum. The users created two new forums and while many of the original people that posted remain, both groups have lost energy and have not attracted many new members.

The biggest global change since 2006, with the most critical implications for this essay, is the explosion of social media in the forms of Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Flickr, Google+ and whatever else people may be using. Facebook alone has over 1.25 billion users. Search engines are sophisticated enough that merely talking about an artist's work online can result in that person finding and contacting you. With the proliferation of cell phones, it has become harder to locate and contact anyone directly after tracking down their

home number and address using Directory Assistance. We are often at the mercy of email, online messaging, or the process of making someone a contact on social media sites, in order to initiate a conversation. I miss the days of reaching out to strangers over the phone after looking up their addresses in the White Pages. I had to do this recently in an attempt to interview an older man about his graphic design work from over forty years ago. He still has a landline, and it was refreshing to also have a short conversation with his elderly mother. You can't have those memorable experiences on social media.

We should question the quality of the exchanges and communication that we have through social media, as well as the many pitfalls of this form (increasingly compromised privacy, endless distraction, and the corporate data mining of ev-



everything we express any interest in i.e., monetization of our desires).

A meaningful shift is that our disparate communities can now see and interact with each other across wholly different compartments of our lives. Networks that were once separate are now unified. The musicians and fans I know from the underground music discussion group now interact with my artist, academic and activist friends on Facebook, alongside high school classmates and family members. Former students become friends with teachers on social media and gain access to their professors' social networks. The experience of having online friends that you have never met in person—a normal thing for many people in niche communities and subcultural online discussion groups—is now common. The depth of conversation, however, is always greater in more specialized communities and the exchanges are a lot more detailed and nuanced. Your siblings and high school buddies probably don't care or need to know about the debates that rage in your creative community.

Cloud-based web storage for files that can be shared with multiple creators simultaneously, has enlarged the range of ways that collaboration can happen. Unfortunately, this requires that we stay tethered to our computers or other Wifi and web-enabled devices. We should consider what is being lost when we use these methods, working less in person or in the same city, and always connected to a device of some kind. Too often, I find that the desire to work with someone new on a project, just means more time sitting alone in front of a computer working on my "part" of the collaboration. I take on fewer projects where I must work with others locally, because the dizzying assortment of potential international collaborators pulls at my attention.

The form of the things I make with others is also limited by the geographical distance. A book is more effectively realized with someone over the web, compared to a garden, for example.

Competition for resources in the art world remains as fierce as ever. We have not recovered from the economic meltdown of 2008, and while social media may effectively circulate news of grants, jobs, exhibitions, and other opportunities, competition remains intense as more artists graduate with advanced degrees into a world with diminishing economic opportunities (often coupled with crushing student loan debt).

In September 2011, Occupy Wall Street erupted to protest social and economic inequality. The movement quickly spread nationally and internationally. Occupy was noteworthy for being a leaderless movement with no key figures emerging, and with highly democratic methods of organizing and communication. At ral-

lies, crowds would repeat each speaker's words in unison to make sure others could hear. Dubbed "the human microphone," it was used in situations where electronic amplification was not available, or where it was (illegally) made unavailable by the police as in the case of Zucotti Park in New York where the Occupy movement began. Numerous sophisticated, collaborative projects were born out of the Occupy movement including beautifully designed newspapers like the Occupy Wall Street Journal, and multiple guerrilla libraries. An unknowable number of relationships and initiatives were borne from the countless hours people spent together protesting and living in encampments.

Two personal developments:

In 2008, Temporary Services started a publishing imprint and web-store called Half Letter Press (halfletterpress.com). We use Half Letter Press to produce book-length works by ourselves and other authors, and to distribute our own publications and the books created by our friends and other independent publishers. We have published five books to date and carry about a hundred and twenty-five titles in our store at any given time. Though small in scale, Half Letter Press has increased visibility and support for the artists and authors of the books we make and sell.

In 2007 I formed an initiative called Public Collectors (publiccollectors.org) that collaborates with, and promotes, the work of others who view collecting and archiving as a creative practice, and who are willing to share the kind of marginal cultural objects and ephemera that museums and large institutions frequently disregard. Public Collectors is at root, an attempt to be more generous and open with the materials that are generated and acquired through my research interests, personal passions, and years of exchanging self-published materials with others.

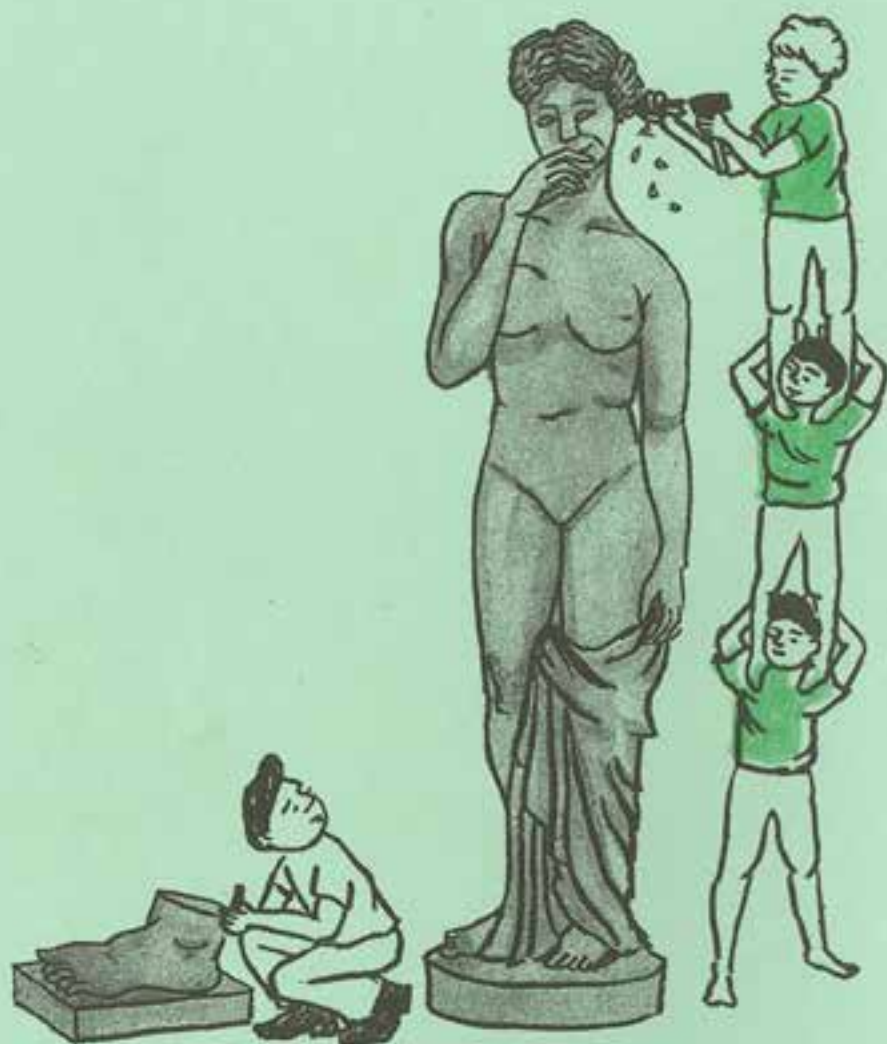
That student from Ireland that I mentioned at the beginning of the essay? I'm not sure what happened to him. He did send me the booklet from his project after it was finished and it all turned out just fine. I hope he's doing well and still making art and not feeling discouraged by the competitive climate that remains in our shared field. There are more opportunities for collaboration, exchange, and participation than ever; the challenge remains to harness these opportunities to build a more generous, ethical, just, and imaginative world on our own terms.

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