

COOPERATION

CO-LABORATION was created with the support of an artist's residency at Harvester Arts in Wichita, Kansas from April 8–26, 2015. It is published on the occasion of *All the Steps in the Process*, an exhibition on view from April 24–May 17 at Harvester Arts. Inspired by publication layout, the show features hand-lettered works on paper, and purpose-built furniture for viewing collaborative artworks contributed by local artists and reading this 'zine.

Thanks to Eleanna Anagnos, Kevin B. Chen, Amanda Curreri, Hallie Noel Linnebur, Leeza Meksin, Meghan Miller, Armando Minjarez, Elizabeth Travelslight, and all survey respondents.

Special thanks to Harvester Arts—Kristin Beal, Kate Van Steenhuyse, Ryan W. Gates—and Harvester's supporters and sponsors. *You make the magic happen.*



Cover: ink on vellum, 8½ x 11"
Back cover: silver ink on paper, 24 x 18"
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HARVESTERARTS.COM CHRISTINEWONGYAP.COM

I made this 'zine to share my research on creative collaboration.

I've become increasingly interested in artists' collectives, agency, mutualism, and the idea that artists can shape an art world that we would like to participate in. For artists accustomed to following our personal creative visions, working with others can be very challenging; I wanted to explore the inherent learning curves and skill building required.

With the help of Harvester Arts and Calie Shivers, I conducted a survey completed by 50 respondents. Twenty-one respondents completed paper surveys in Wichita; twenty-nine others from within and beyond Kansas submitted responses online. While I expected the anonymous replies to air grievances, the majority of respondents emphasized their positive experiences, outcomes, and lessons learned. See the responses visualized and summarized on page 4.

I initiated deeper conversations by interviewing eight artists who are also organizers, curators, and collective members. They're based in Wichita, the San Francisco Bay Area (where

I'm from), and New York (where I live now). I appreciated these artists' fine-tuned perspectives gathered over many years of experience. For example, Armando Minjarez (p. 18), Amanda Curreri (p. 16), and Elizabeth Travelslight (p. 20) explain how being activists, organizers, or members of worker co-ops gave them interpersonal and personal skill sets for working with others and becoming better collaborators. I heard from members of artists' collectives: Leeza Meksin and Eleanna Anagnos, fellow members with me in Ortega y Gasset (p. 14); Curreri, of ERNEST, a working group de-emphasizing individual identities (p. 16); and Hallie Linnebur and Meghan Miller, of the collaborative performance duo, Linnebur & Miller (p. 12). Kevin B. Chen, a longtime curator, shares great advice about listening to artists and communities and being humble (p. 22).

This is not my first 'zine. I made a scrappy, upstart, highly collaborative 'zine in high school, and it corresponded with a period of political awakening that later led to becoming an activist and community artist. Now, following recent participatory projects using photocopied activity sheets, I'm excited to share this booklet with you today; I think it's a naturally democratic means of distributing ideas gathered from many voices.

I hope you enjoy mulling the bounties of working with other people.

Christine Wong Yap

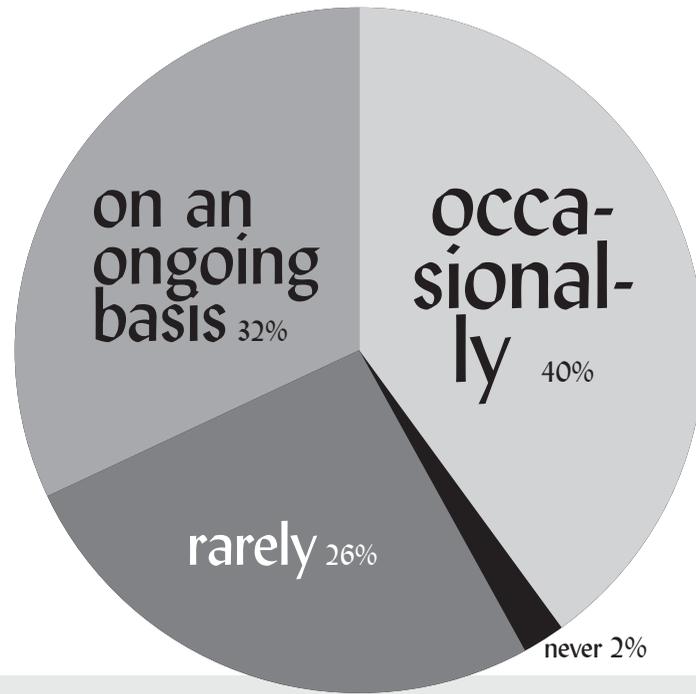
COLLABORATORS
ARE BUILT THROUGH
PRACTICE
ATTENTION
DISCIPLINE
PASSION
COMMITMENT
& HABIT

TWYLA THARP

Fifty respondents, one

SURVEY

I PARTICIPATE IN ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS:



I VIEW MY MOST RECENT COLLABORATION WITH

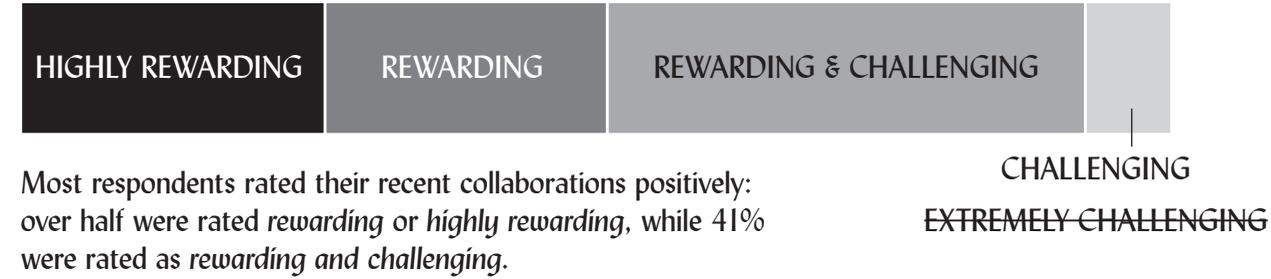


Respondents were OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE about recent collaborations.

Over 60% overall view recent collaborations with *gratitude*. The same is true of the subset of *ongoing* collaborators, while only 53% of those who *rarely* collaborate do so.

46% who *rarely* collaborate view recent collaborations with *mixed feelings*. Only 25% of *ongoing* collaborators feel the same.

I WOULD RATE MY RECENT COLLABORATION AS:



"ARE REWARDING AND CHALLENGING ANTONYMS? FOR ME, SOMETHING THAT IS VERY CHALLENGING ALSO BECOMES THE MOST REWARDING BECAUSE OF THE WORK IT REQUIRES."

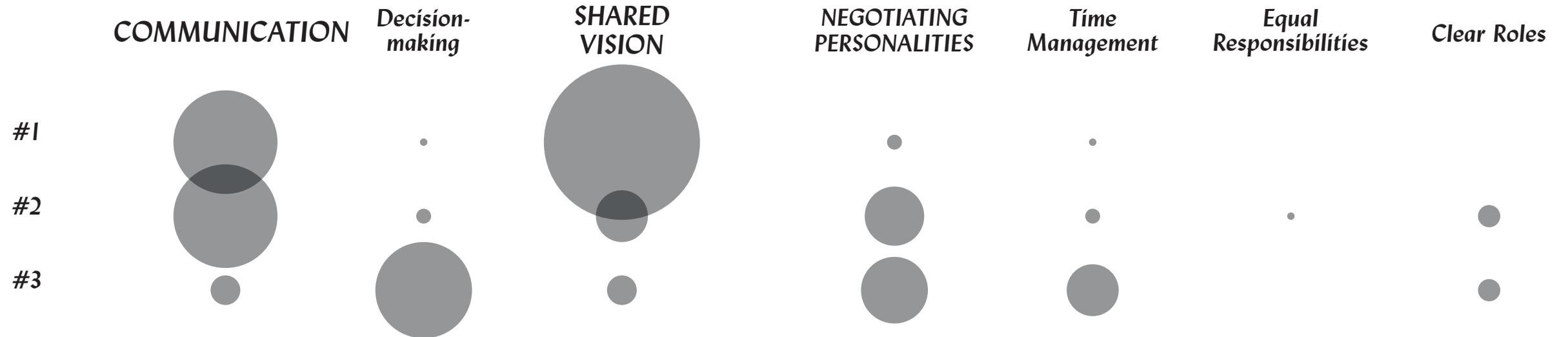
I WILL APPROACH FUTURE COLLABORATIONS WITH



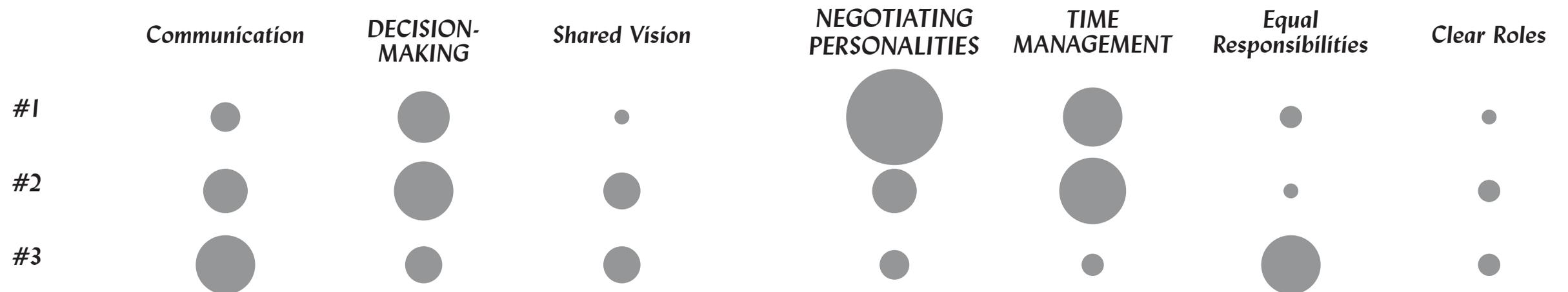
60% said they will approach future collaborations with *curiosity*; over half with *enthusiasm*.

Most *ongoing* collaborators will approach future collaborations with *curiosity* (13 of 16), while *occasional* collaborators will use *enthusiasm* (14 of 20).

The aspects I find most important are:



The aspects I find most challenging are:



I have participated in collaborations because:

PERSONAL GROWTH

It becomes a learning experience—everyone involved leaves the project with a better understanding of themselves and their work.

I want to learn new things firsthand from people who know.

I grow from it every time even if it is sometimes difficult or an unsuccessful project.

Breaking out of my comfort zone is good.

It pushes my thinking in different directions and breaks me out of the ruts in my mind.

VALUES

I find value in conversations, ideas, and confrontations.

I want to feel more connected to other artists.

I love what happens when you start by giggling about an idea over cocktails and then make it a reality. The process of working with people when there's an affinity gets me out of my own mind.

We are better together.

EXTERNAL ACHIEVEMENTS

My ideas become a reality.

Peer pressure.

Obligation, friendship and opportunity.

I try not to pass up an opportunity to show my work.

"I HAVEN'T PARTICIPATED IN COLLABORATIONS BECAUSE I HAVEN'T HAD ANYONE INSPIRATIONAL AROUND ME IN A WHILE."

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

IF THERE ISN'T A SHARED VISION I DON'T EVEN GO THERE ANYMORE.

YOU NEED TO BE WARMED BY THE SAME FIRE OR NOT AT ALL.

THE SHARED IDEA WAS GREATER THAN OUR OWN WORK.

WE INVESTED ALL OF OUR TIME INTO THAT, NOT OUR EGOS.

IN MY MOST SUCCESSFUL collaboration, we knew at the outset what the outcome would be: twelve pieces and an exhibition. We had dates, timelines, and our medium all picked out. These parameters made us work very hard to get to the good ideas and resulted in some great artworks. We had some fights along the way, but it was because we were both really invested in the work and in the process. It was stressful, but I would do it again in a second.

IN MY MOST CHALLENGING collaboration, we went into it as a very open-ended thing, just to see what would happen—no set goal, no exhibition at the end. I think we were both hoping for creative sparks to fly, but in reality neither of us felt comfortable making decisions that would undo what the other had done, and we eventually just lost the energy for it. No bad blood, no hard feelings, no shouting matches...it just fizzled out, and the artwork went nowhere.

Think of the most successful creative collaboration you've participated in. What made it work? How? Why?

ATTITUDES & RESPECT

Willingness to put aside attitudes to work together toward an end goal. And improvisation.

Let go of past challenges to see the project through to successful completion (take a positive attitude towards challenges).

Respect for one another and the work and the product.

Teamwork.

Profound professional and personal respect and confidence in each other and each other's work.

A SHARED VISION

It worked because we wanted the same things and no one wanted all the credit/glory.

Shared vision is the thing that drives the most successful collaborations.

Shared vision and equal enthusiasm.

Shared vision and goal. Time pressure. With these two things in place the rest took care of itself.

LUCK

Everyone was enthusiastic and contributed in good faith. Positive energy, synergy. The why is luck, I think. Right place at the right time. We should all be so lucky.

PEOPLE

Working with highly skilled partner.

Several of the participants were very experienced collaborators. They had a good sense of how to avoid common pitfalls—good note taking, bullet-point to-do listing, making sure people felt heard, taking on leadership roles without taking over.

A group of people who wanted to succeed. People who took pride in their work.

Communication, leadership, compromise, and great artistic talent.

Think of the most challenging creative collaboration you've participated in. What made it challenging? How? Why?

GROUP DYNAMICS

One member felt she had no say; her frustration affected the group's ability to work together.

Having one person criticizing ideas and projecting their wants.

Lack of trust.

Unyielding views.

Selfishness from the collaborator; it made the space between us tense and their lack of generosity made me not want to be generous with them.

LOTS of egos.

RESOLUTION

We never quite figured out the best way to work through conflicting ideas.

INVESTMENT

Time and money.

Time management.

My partner was unreliable, and the venue and curator undermined us. I have learned to gauge potential commitment of all crucial parties before moving forward on a project, to linger in research stage as long as possible.

POWER & AUTHORSHIP

It turned quickly from collaboration to me working (uncredited) for the senior scholar because we were unequal in the power structure.

Sometimes people think they want to collaborate, even as they are also invested in singular authorship.

ROLES

Sometimes no one is willing to take a leadership role, but some projects really need leadership. It's exhausting to have to constantly direct others when there is work to do. It doesn't feel like collaborating.

Roles/authority between artists. Contributing to someone else's project as a participant is much different than collaboration in vision.

EXPECTATIONS

While I found the process rewarding, I was disappointed in the results.

Who you work with is everything. Collaboration is dangerous when processes and expectations are not clearly outlined from the onset.

INTER-VIEWS

The following interviews were conducted between April 13 to 19, 2015. Due to space limitations, they appear in excerpted form.

Let's talk about collaboration with **Linnebur & Miller**

Linnebur & Miller is a collaborative art duo comprised of Wichita State University alumnae and best friends Hallie Noel Linnebur and Meghan Miller.

Christine Wong Yap: How long have you collaborated for? How has your collaboration evolved? Is the collaborative creative process easier now, or does each project present new challenges?

Hallie Noel Linnebur: We've been doing things as "Linnebur & Miller" for about 2.5 years. We've been friends a lot longer than that. Personally, I don't feel like it gets any easier or any harder... we both get bored easily, and each project we put together is a brand new thing in many ways. Our ability to work together has stayed pretty consistent. We have similar tastes, ideas about art, and styles of working. We're both laid-back and flexible, we're both procrastinators, and we have about the same threshold for stress. And neither of us take the art we do so seriously that we would ever let it get to a point where our friendship is in jeopardy. I think **either of us would pull the plug on Linnebur & Miller in a heartbeat if we felt like it wasn't fun anymore, or if it was hurting either of us or driving us apart.**

Meghan Miller: Each project presents new challenges but we're starting to have some parts carry over from project to project after a couple of years. Getting the technical parts right frees up time for the creative parts.

CWY: *You collaborate on performances and installations that are wacky; they're spectacles. What motivates you to work in this*

way? Are there aspects about collaborating, or your partner, that enhances your ability to take on these projects?

HNL: We're both kind of shy people, actually. One way we overcome our shyness is to assume some persona and then create a costume around that persona. Then we've got "costume courage."

MM: Why do we make the things we make? We create imaginary scenarios and order the world to our liking. There is no reason for our pretend jobs or spaces or situations to exist; we've made our job/profession/calling to make these things happen for others to experience. The Linnebur & Miller world is mock-serious, play-pretend, dreamlike, surreal. We just want the world to be weirder and more exciting, and with our collaborations we can make that happen, if just in a small part of our own city. **We want our city to be weirder. We do what we can.**

I've found working with other artists to be much more productive, especially for performance and installation. It's easier to gain momentum and harder to give up on a project or change plans halfway through. It's easier to call attention to my artwork or myself when it isn't just my artwork.

CWY: *Do you continue to practice as individual artists? How does your work as a collaboration inform your individual practice, and or versa?*

HNL: Not lately. I feel like Linnebur & Miller stuff takes up most of the artistic energy that I

have to give currently—which I'm fine with.

MM: Working in collaboration has been a confidence-building experience. I love making things but I tend to reject the things I make. Our Linnebur & Miller practice is teaching me to just make, and accept whatever it is and use it regardless of how I feel about it.

CWY: *To what would you attribute the success of your most successful collaborations?*

HNL: If a lot of people show up and have fun, we get good feedback, and most importantly, if we have fun, then it's a success. To be honest, though, money is always a source of both motivation and stress for us. Neither of us have full-time jobs. When we're working on a project, we treat it like it's our "real" job. We're not delusional—we know it's an amazing thing to do installation or performance art in this city and turn any kind of profit. But we always try to at least make it a possibility to get paid a fair(-ish) wage for the hours we put in.

MM: **Striking a good balance between working together and working apart is important to a successful project—if the balance is off it can be a little stressful and confusing, but we usually find an equilibrium because it's just easier that way.** We may come to a general agreement of what needs to be done then delegate jobs, and we just do it. There's trust involved.

LINNEBURANDMILLER.WIX.COM/LINNEBURANDMILLER

Let's talk about collaboration with

Leeza Meksin & Eleanna Anagnos

Leeza Meksin and Eleanna Anagnos are Brooklyn-based visual artists and a founding member and member, respectively, of Ortega y Gasset (OyG) projects, a three-year old curatorial collective and project space currently based in Gowanus, Brooklyn, NY.

CWY: Can you talk about your experience with collaborations?

Leeza Meksin: [A video documentary project on drug abuse and HIV in Ukraine in 2009] was a humbling experience and gratifying in the end—probably the most important creative project I've ever done. But we were under a lot of stress. I think the worst and best of people comes out then. But in the end, we bonded in a way that could never change.

There's always that fear in collaborative projects, where you're kind of feeling each other out and thinking, "Where is the edge? How much can you take before you throw your hands up and be done with it?"

CWY: Has participating in a collective or collaboration shifted your attitude or how you participate in the art world at large?

LM: I feel very empowered by the collective—how we come together and provide a platform for artists that we believe in. I also love that

we discover so many artists together. It shifted the paradigm in a local way for me. The more collective and artist-run spaces there are, the better for the art world. We're doing something important, and I have a sense of mission about it. **We are all equally responsible for the success or failure of the project.**

Eleanna Anagnos: I feel like what we're doing is more important than what Gagosian is doing because the focus isn't about making money. I don't know if you can preserve that integrity. We give ourselves the freedom to focus on what's really important. We're creating a genuine dialogue.

CWY: Has anything surprised you?

LM: The pleasant surprise was, I thought that I'm bound not to like some of the shows, because we all have different tastes, agendas, priorities. But that did not happen. I love all our shows. The shows that are the most different than what I would have done were my favorites.

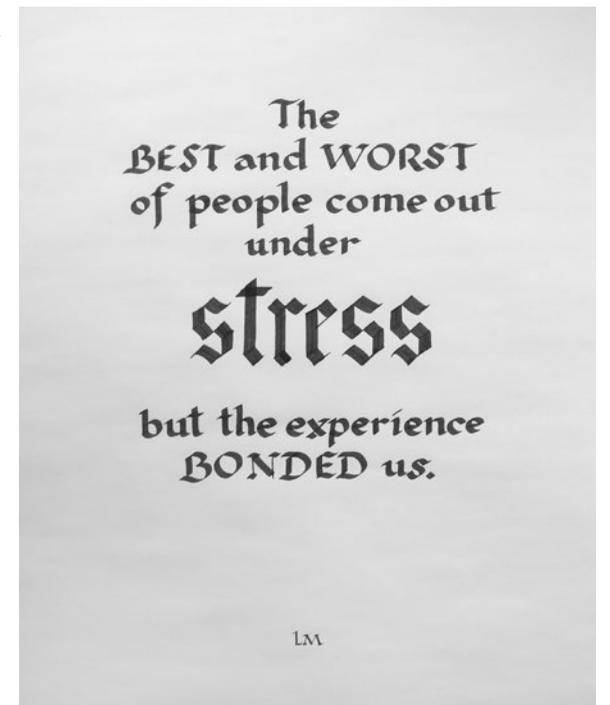
In the beginning, the group talked about how we have to take a leap of faith together, and not micromanage each other, and believe in each other, that each one of us will do a good job in our way. I was skeptical, but I was proven wrong—and I loved it. The program felt so strong specifically because it was so different.

CWY: Anything else you'd like to add?

LM: People not in other collectives sometimes assume that being in a collective means having to sacrifice—such as my time and work to do something else for the 'greater good.' **I get a lot out of this. I would not be doing it if it was just charity.** It's feeding me and my work, and a lot of opportunities have opened up to me and my practice through my associations with the collective and the artists we show. I really feel like the more energy that you put into it, the more you get back.

Being in a collective is a lot of work, and sometimes I have doubts, but most of the time things come

ink on
paper
24 x 18"



together in magical ways that make me feel like I can't believe I wasn't part of this sooner.

EA: In art, it's easy to be "Me! Me! Me!" all the time—I want to be in this show, I want representation—instead of giving to the larger community. Giving opens opportunities and also gets your head out of that toxic mentality that's not an inspiring place to be. The collective helps me get out of that headspace.

MEKSIN.COM
ELEANNA.COM
OYGPROJECTS.COM

Let's talk about collaboration with

Amanda Curreri

Amanda Curreri is an interdisciplinary artist and educator based in Oakland, CA and relocating to Cincinnati, OH. She is active in ERNEST, a flexible group of artists in the San Francisco Bay Area, who have been realizing a two-year project at c3:initiative in Portland, OR.

CWY: What drew you towards working with others?

Amanda Curreri: I enjoy activities that bring people together and allow for intersubjective experiences. Lately, I'm more consciously articulating the tools I have from my grassroots organizing work in Boston from the mid 90s in the early aughts. I learned how to organize and research for boycotts and actions, and how to engage with people on the street and in their homes all over Boston. These specific skills are entering my work with new clarity.

CWY: In choosing the right partners in a collaboration, what traits or values do you look for?

ABC: Commitment, flexibility, willingness to have fun and fuck up, responsibility to the process and to one another, communication, respect, difference, and interest in growth. That it meets some implicit need for everyone, even if it differs person-to-person.

CWY: Can you tell me more about ERNEST?

ABC: ERNEST is a working group and we've been meeting every Sunday plus additional on-site time in Portland for the past year and a half now. Primarily ERNEST allows for a mode of spending time with others in a critical but social context. We initially wanted an antidote to the alienation that comes from the professionalization of art and art-as-job (i.e., capital).

CWY: I'm intrigued by the shifting nature of ERNEST's make-up, and its de-emphasis on individual identities. Why was this important?

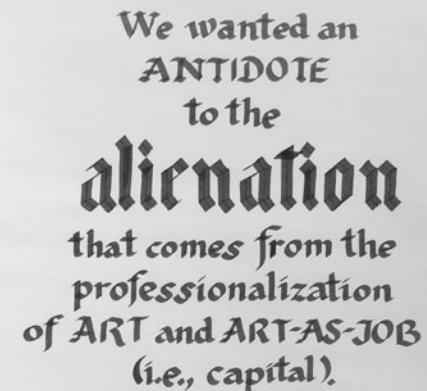
ABC: It's practical. So many of us have demanding personal art practices and ERNEST serves as an alternative outlet where we can loosen the trajectories or manifest them in different ways. It's exciting to find ourselves producing work that we have no way of anticipating since it can only be made in negotiation with one another. Everyone's input and reservations and convictions get processed and we come up with things that we could never envision individually.

This way of working more anonymously is also a way to test and challenge how we as artists get consumed and explained by institutions, historians, curators, press. If it works, maybe we create a functioning monster (ERNEST as Frankenstein?) that can confound tropes of making meaning and assigning value.

CWY: How has having a flexible group surprised you? Have there been particular challenges related to this flexibility? How did you meet them?

ABC: It is challenging to meet weekly. Some folks have had to step out or redefine their relationship; we fold in new people as well. We're still experientially learning and understanding that [time commitment] aspect of the group.

The structure of the work and the group are defined by how we can accommodate a range of voices and participants. It also works well working in the St. Johns community of Portland, allowing for necessary partnerships.



We wanted an
ANTIDOTE
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detail, ink
on paper
24 x 18"

There's an awareness of being facilitators and needing to create situations for transitive engagement. The different components of the Demos project—video, book, event, and print collaboration—are built to present the different voices and vulnerabilities in the project.

CWY: ERNEST has been in residence at c3 in various smaller configurations. How much autonomy do individuals have to steer the artistic direction? How much input do individuals not present have?

ABC: We're a conscientious group—one reason for the play on the word 'earnest.' There are usually check-ins with one another for feedback but room for difference of opinions. The large scope of Demos also dictates forms of delegation, trust, and facilitation in order to get beyond ourselves.

Everyone has to find a balance of letting go and also [knowing] when to fight for or against something in the process. It's a tight balance between letting go and controlling the context so that it remains open for meaning.

CWY: Does ERNEST's purpose drive its identity? Or does its purpose shift according to the interest of members?

ABC: I think it will take another project to test that. As a working group, it's all about testing ideas, creating relationships, and ways to spend meaningful time with interesting people.

AMANDACURRERI.COM

Let's talk about collaboration with

Armando Minjarez

Wichita-based Armando Minjarez is a Mexican visual artist and social justice activist who has focused on immigrant rights. His many community-based, collaborative activities include co-founding and serving as resident artist at The Seed House/La Casa de la Semilla, a space for developing community leaders, where he coordinates ICT ARMY of Artists.

Editor's note: "ICT" is the code for Wichita's airport, and shorthand for Wichita itself.

CWY: Can you tell me more about ICT ARMY of Artists? Who is it, and why did you form it?

Armando Minjarez: The ICT ARMY of Artists is a collective of artists, creatives, and provocateurs primarily living in Wichita, KS, with satellite members throughout the state. The idea was born out of frustration at the divisive, xenophobic rhetoric from Kansas politicians and people in power.

We wanted to have an outlet for underrepresented communities to have a loud voice to talk about the injustices we live with everyday. Kansas has a long history of progressive, radical thinkers who have had global impact...so I wanted to honor and continue that tradition.

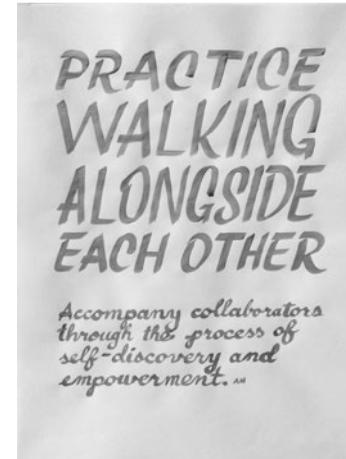
CWY: As community-based, social justice organizations/collectives, how does collaboration manifest in ICT's activities?

AM: Collaboration is at the heart of everything we do, and initially, it is one of the biggest challenges to the artists who join our ranks. We usually hit the streets to get a sense of the locals and build trust. Then we invite residents to brainstorm for a mural or project and engage them in the design process. Everyone has a chance to participate and have meaningful input. We have to trust that, if given the space to reflect and express freely, you will have the answers.

CWY: How do your collaborations inform your individual art practice, and/or vice versa?

AM: It has greatly impacted my work. I have a background in ceramics—which is collective, because of the infrastructure—and painting—which can be reclusive.

Last year I started an experiment...I challenged my friends, who were always hanging out in my studio, to make something with me. If they wanted to hang out they had to make something. Months later, I had an entire art show,



gold paint
on paper
24 x 18"

Un Recuerdo, done in collaboration with over 30 friends and family. It was the most beautiful exhibition I have presented so far!

CWY: I'm interested in how to honor the labor of making a collective group of artists work. There's visible, external labor towards goals, and the invisible administration or collectivity. Can you speak to this as a longtime activist?

AM: As a community organizer, I received training on working collectively and organizing people towards a common goal, developing leadership and challenging people to push themselves. That has given me a unique set of tools that I bring to the ICT AofA.

Sometimes I just have to step back and let people move at their own pace, even if I feel that they have the skills and potential to do amazing things. I have to accompany them through the process of self-discovery and empowerment; meet them where they are at, physically, emotionally and in their practice.

Creating a group culture of caring for one another, no matter what, has been key to our success so far.

CWY: I think a state of constant negotiation is challenging. But activists seem to have a higher tolerance for flux. Would you agree?

AM: It's all about the collective benefit. We all have opinions, and desires, and personal demons. But we also have to identify something bigger than ourselves, that we all can benefit from, enjoy and celebrate. So we have to remain honest and humble. I'm interested in the idea of 'walking alongside' someone, to 'accompany' someone in their struggle. It's not my struggle but I can relate to their emotions and go along with them through their healing process. I want this to be an integral part of ICT ARMY of Artists members, because that is essentially what we are doing in our neighborhood projects.

CWY: To what would you attribute the success of your most successful collaborations?

AM: I would say with no hesitation that when we offer ourselves in a honest and genuine way and acknowledge the dignity of all those involved in any given project, things tend to work out well. Acknowledging the dignity of people is key to a successful collaboration and building a powerful movement for social justice. No room for self-righteousness.

ARMANDOMINJAREZ.COM
THESEEDHOUSE.ORG

Let's talk about collaboration with

Elizabeth Traveflight

Elizabeth Traveflight is an executive staff member of the Bay Area Society for Art and Activism. She is an artist who has worked in a worker co-operative for almost 10 years, and is currently faculty at the San Francisco Art Institute.

CWY: For some artists, it's easiest to work alone. Why is it important to involve others?

ET: In my studio practice, I just make decisions and execute them, which has its own pleasures and satisfactions. I need that because the collective aspects of the other things I do are just emotionally more difficult. It's emotionally easy to do what you want, when you want, how you want. But then your abilities are limited to what one person can do. To do more, you need more people and you need the skills that go along with working together.

In a co-op, you don't have to have the skill or capital to do everything yourself. Everyone can come with their own skills and their own investment ability—be that money or time. To organize that in a democratic fashion is really liberating. The architecture and geometry of the human relationships that we form when we collaborate with people in [democratic worker co-ops] is sadly really unique.

When you're working with a group of people

who are equally and democratically invested in the same mission or project it's amazing. It becomes quite habitual—you get in the habit of seeing people fully and being seen fully. Not having to censor or silence yourself because you're afraid of someone with more power than you. It's really enriching to be part of an environment where power is being distributed equally, and everyone is empowered equally.

CWY: Your experience with worker co-ops could be valuable to artists' collectives. What advice would you offer to collaborating artists or artist collectives?

ET: It can often feel frustrating when you're working in a democratic collective, and it's often because capitalism creates a situation where speed feels efficient. When you're trying to make a decision, every person involved goes through their own process of introspection based on their own experiences—that takes a lot of time. The thing I learned when I was involved in collectives was that ultimately lead to better decisions. I guess the difference is like

the difference between different sized boats. As an individual you can make a decision and self-correct, pretty easily. As a group, it's like a tanker; self correction takes a long time to turn the boat around. Taking a long time to decide which way you want to go ultimately is more efficient, over a longer scale of time (even if it may seem like you're sitting in meetings for hours and hours at a time).

CWY: Can you talk how to find satisfaction in the invisible labor that is not the external purpose of the group?

ET: As a woman, as a mom, I often spend a lot of time making myself feel good about invisible labor, which often goes unacknowledged. It really comes down to an ego meditation around what it is I want acknowledgement from others for, and what it is I can acknowledge myself for, and that's enough.

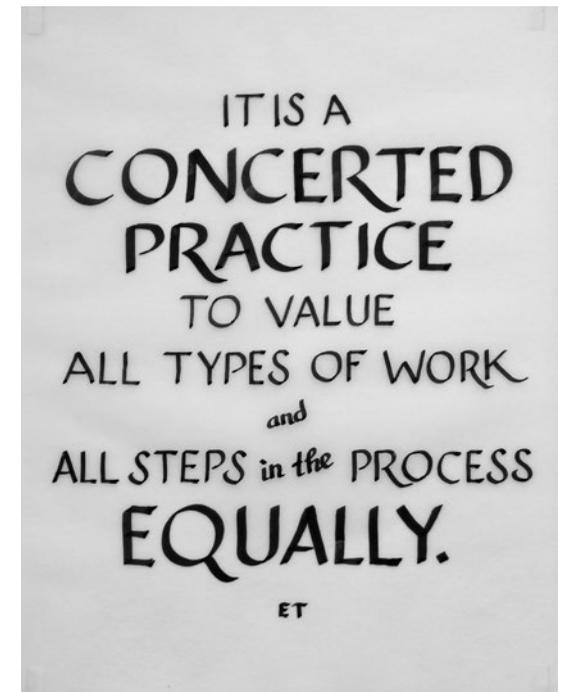
When everyone is working democratically and non-hierarchically, it becomes a really concerted practice to value all kinds of work that go into making it function. Valuing all the steps in the process equally. Skill sharing is such an important part of working collaboratively over the long term. Creating a structure where people can learn and move around, and having that be part of the organization's culture, is really valuable.

When you're working by yourself, you have some certitude about who you are and what you want to do, and how you actualize that. If

you're working in true collaboration with other people, part of the pleasure of that is also part of the anxiety, where you open yourself up and make yourself vulnerable to being changed by forces outside of yourself. And the change could be really great, because, suddenly you're finding yourself doing things you never thought you would. Or it could be really uncomfortable if you're not in a group where you feel safe then you've opened yourself but then you're maligned or misused. But I think that's what I've always enjoyed about collaboration is that roller coaster ride.

ELIZABETHTRAVELSLIGHT.COM

ARTANDACTIVISM.ORG



ink on vellum, 11 x 8 1/2"

Let's talk about collaboration with

Kevin B. Chen

Kevin B. Chen is an artist, curator, and writer based in Oakland, CA. His work is represented by Jack Fischer Gallery in San Francisco. A longtime curator as the Director of Visual Arts and Jazz at Intersection for the Arts, his currently works with the City of Oakland's Public Art Advisory Committee, Recology, and the de Young Museum.

CWY: What, how, and why you curate seems particularly collaborative. Do you see it as a collaboration? Does it relate to your experiences as an artist?

Kevin B. Chen: I definitely see many of the projects I've worked on over the years as collaborative in ideation, process, and execution. Why not hop on the journey together from the beginning? I've been fortunate to work with many artists in this manner, where the initial idea is just a small kernel that blossoms into a larger dialogue—in the truest sense of the word. The curator/artist relationship in my opinion should be much more fluid and collaborative and mutual, rather than one that is predicated on a dynamic based on a singular vision.

As a young person, Kala Art Institute was an amazing place to be—a shared facility for print-making with an ethos of collectivity and collaboration. This was seminal in my thinking about artistic practice as part of a larger dialogue, a

community. It was (and is) a real community of artists whose ideas and work didn't exist in the vacuum of a solitary studio, but rather was in the open and collectively shared. The notion of gestalt—the whole is more than the sum of its individual parts—took root for me then.

CWY: You curate community-based and social justice shows where collaboration seems important—artistically, aesthetically, and politically. Could you share some thoughts on this?

KBC: I think when you explore topics that are relevant or specific to a particular community, you need to do R&D about and with that community before even beginning to explore what artworks will represent or discuss those topics. **I believe that there will always be someone more informed and experience about an idea, topic, or community than myself.** There's that saying that if you are the smartest person in a room, then you are in the wrong room. Our friend Jessica Tully has a project from 2006

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K B C

titled “Our Allies Are Everywhere,” which is like a professional mantra for me.

Always reach out and connect with people whose expertise rivals and surpasses your own. Be it within the scope of an area of focus, a particular community, a defined experience, a historical moment, an aesthetic palette, research individuals who you can connect with to talk about your ideas, and then bring them into the process as the project unfolds and develops. And **steadfastly remain open to ideas and conversations** to help steer the way the project will be shaped. There’s strength in numbers, and the more a project or idea can be shared across different perspectives and experiences, the richer it will be.

CWY: This way of curating seems risky. What are the trade-offs of these experimental, topical approaches?

KBC: I don’t think it’s right to encourage artists to take risks without providing some basic platform of understanding about the ideas and topics being pursued. There has to be a common understanding and agreement of a small safe zone where you can jump off of. Yet the trade-offs can be enormous, sometimes crucial in identifying a new body of work or a new methodology of working.

In the non-profit sector, the demands of the market aren’t so explicitly dominant. I’ve been able to take risks centered around concept and process and ideas.

CWY: To what would you attribute the success of your most successful collaborations? To what would you attribute the difficulties your most challenging collaborations?

KBC: The most successful collaborations are the ones where the ideas are fully embraced artistically, conceptually, and emotionally by everyone working on the project, where the sense of ownership of the idea is shared and collective. And **communication, communication, communication is key!** Especially when projects generate new ideas and work, and the territory is uncharted, it’s really important to know how each person is thinking, feeling, and moving forward. Lack of communication, or unclear communication, is a primary reason why collaborations can be challenging or even unsuccessful. And I would also say the most successful collaborations are **the cultivation of ongoing relationships that span years and manifest into projects numerous times.**

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OUR
ALLIES
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WHERE

Jessica Tully