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**“An Association,” contact list, 1977 (image provided by Alan Moore)**

May 1977 proved to be an active month for the New York art world and its growing alternatives. The Guggenheim Museum mounted a retrospective of the color-field painter Kenneth Noland; a short drive upstate, Storm King presented monumental abstract sculptures by Alexander Liberman; and the Museum of Modern Art featured a retrospective of Robert Rauschenberg’s work. As for the Whitney Museum of American Art, contemporary reviews are reminders that not much has changed with its much-contested Biennial of new art work, which was panned by *The Village Voice*, *The Nation*, and, of course, Hilton Kramer in the *New York Times*, whose review headline, “This Whitney Biennial Is as Boring as Ever,” said it all.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, *Art in America* reported that the New Museum, a non-collecting space started by Marcia Tucker some five months earlier, was “to date,

simply an office in search of exhibition space and benefactors.”<sup>2</sup> A month later in the same magazine, the critic Phil Patton’s article on alternative spaces reported an altogether different story about the growth of artistic venues beyond New York’s major museum collections and commercial galleries. This was a mixed blessing, however. Describing an active group of federally funded and “service-oriented spaces” for artists, he concluded that they were already integrated into the art market only eight years after emerging as independent, artist-run spaces.<sup>3</sup> Sounding much like purist community activists and right-wing political critics of a decade later and even today, he wondered what public was being served by this

federal support other than the marketplace and young artists seeking careers in the commercial gallery system.<sup>4</sup>

A rather mundane piece of paper from this period tells us that May was also one beginning of a New York artists’ group, Collaborative Projects, Inc., better known as Colab. Scribbled across the top of this document is the date, May 22, 1977, with a simple and no-name subject heading, “an association.” Below this are three rows: alphabetically ordered names of artists who attended an organizational meeting, followed by their addresses and telephone numbers. By the middle of the page, several names are handwritten and out of order, disrupting the document’s visual uniformity. Some are penned in childlike upper-case letters, while others are written in rapid and messy cursive. This unremarkable list is one of the earliest known records of an informal gathering of painters, sculptors, filmmakers, writers, musicians, photographers, performers, critics, and other experimental artists. Eighteen months later, this loosely knit group would incorporate as a nonprofit artists’ organization under the official name of Collaborative Projects, Inc., and would seek funding directly from government arts agencies to support the group’s collaborative work across media.<sup>5</sup>

Today little is known of the collective’s initial activities as a multimedia organization in the late 1970s. Rather, Colab has a well-established foothold in histories of the early 1980s as a group that helped launch graffiti art and incubate the work of featured members creating in the traditional media of painting and sculpture, such as John Ahearn, Jane Dickson, Rebecca Howland, Jenny Holzer, James Nares, Tom Otterness, Kiki Smith, and Robin Winters, among others. Colab is also recognized in most art surveys for its sponsorship of unjuried exhibitions such as *The Real Estate Show* and *The Times Square Show*, the latter held in an abandoned

David E. Little

## Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces

1. David Bourdon, “A Critic’s Diary: The New York Art Year,” *Art in America* 21, no. 4 (July–August, 1977): 75.

2. “News,” *Art in America* 21, no. 3 (May–June 1977): 164.

3. Phil Patton, “Other Voices, Other Rooms: The Rise of the Alternative Space,” *Art in America* 21, no. 4 (July–August, 1977): 80.

4. “The art they [alternatives] sponsor is inevitably, art for the art world, even as they turn to increased public funding [i.e., NEA funding].” Patton, 89.

5. The association soon adopted the name the Green Corporation from approximately the summer of 1977 through September of 1978, when it incorporated as Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Another nonprofit had already claimed Green Corporation as a name.) For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the group as Colab even during this period from 1977 to September 1978. According to Colen Fitzgibbon’s records, Colab was incorporated on April 25, 1978, with Beth B acting as president, and Fitzgibbon filed the final application for recognition of tax exemption on September 30, 1979. Before Colab achieved its nonprofit status, the group applied for its first NEA grants through Liza Bear’s Center for New Art Activities, Inc., which, according to Bear, was the sponsoring organization for *Avalanche* magazine and later the first issues of *Bomb* magazine.



massage parlor in the summer of 1980 and hailed by *The Village Voice* as “the first radical art show of the 1980s.”<sup>6</sup> In short, Colab is best known for establishing ad hoc, temporary shows for the display of art and, in the most clichéd narrative of the art industry, for providing exhibition opportunities to launch the careers of those branded as “emerging artists,” with special attention to the success stories.

The archival list, however, leads back to a time of flux, anonymity, and possibility, from 1977 until roughly 1979, that interrupts the flow of the seamless narratives that collapse group activities into the singularity of authors, objects, and exhibitions, a time when Colab experimented with the unwieldy and indeed radical model of a self-governing artists’ group with a commitment to collaboration in the production of art. This suggestion of the radical is not always evident in Colab’s political ends and effectiveness (indeed few groups can make such claims in practice, even those from the powerful historical avant-garde), but rather in its organizational structure and principles as a nonhierarchical and mixed-gender group (roughly 50 percent men and 50 percent women), as well as in its development of an open artistic practice from which emerged agile working collaboratives.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, no other group in the history of avant-garde groups and artists’ organizations had successfully established a mixed-gender group like Colab (historical groups tended to be strict patriarchies and dictatorships, with the ever-popular Guy Debord and the Situationist International serving as a prime example), in which women served as both members and leaders within the organization.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult not to read too much into the visual appearance of this formative document, which suggests the essential nature of the group circa spring 1977 as an unrefined and unnamed group seeking to find a reason to be associated. The artists who had gathered were friends, acquaintances, neighbors, former art-school classmates, friends of friends, and others who shared a desire to organize their efforts. Meeting weekly as a whole and in smaller subgroups of associates, they debated how the group would function practically, politically, and ideologically. The list itself, of course, reveals little of the group’s conceptual basis, the attendees’ motivations, and the specific cultural and economic conditions that brought these artists together. It provides few clues for the most obvious questions: Why did these artists gather in 1977? What were the group’s aims, interests, and strategies? How did they organize and operate? Some answers are found in the group’s relationship to the New York art system in the late 1970s, especially a set of conditions that included government funding for arts and a growing network of alternative spaces.

Colab formed during a period of grand cultural and lived contradictions in New York, an atmosphere captured in even the most selective descriptions. Pop culture produced the movies *Star Wars*, which broke records at the box office, and *Saturday Night Fever*, with John Travolta playing a working-class Italian-American seeking the American dream and leading the way to a disco craze. At the same moment, subculture offered three-chord guitar riffs and do-it-yourself antimusic and anticulture from the Sex Pistols and numerous New York bands made up of untrained musicians, the irreverent humor of *Punk* magazine, and movies such as *Taxi Driver*, which featured a post-Vietnam America replete with unpredictable violence, prostitution, and class struggle, and documented the bleak state of New York City on the brink of declaring bankruptcy in 1976. (FORD TO CITY:

6. Richard Goldstein, “The First Radical Art Show of the ‘80s,” *The Village Voice*, June 16, 1980, 1.

7. In the distribution of grant money, all Colab members voted democratically on who could receive the money for projects. The rules of the distribution were clearly outlined: 1) a Colab member was anyone who attended three consecutive meetings; 2) a project could receive money only if it had at least three people working on it, at least two of them Colab members; 3) the organization’s meetings and voting processes would follow *Robert’s Rules of Order*.

8. In 1977 Beth B served as the president, Katy Martin as vice-president, and Uli Rimkus as secretary. In 1978 and 1979 Colen Fitzgibbon was president, and in 1979 Andrea Callard was secretary and Uli Rimkus treasurer.

DROP DEAD ran the headline in the *Daily News* as President Gerald Ford refused to grant an emergency loan to the city to help it from bankruptcy.) Yet many opportunities existed for young artists working in New York during this period, with unprecedented state and federal support for the arts (the National Endowment for the Arts had \$3.5 million in funding for the visual arts and the New York State Council on the Arts an additional \$9 million). An artist could survive with a part-time job and have time to produce work. Real-estate prices enabled artists to rent apartments and form communities in downtown Manhattan (Colab members lived mostly on the Lower East Side and in Tribeca). With government assistance, the number of alternative spaces domestically and especially in New York had grown so rapidly from the late 1960s to the early 1970s that they were soon identified as a full-fledged movement, the “alternative-space movement,” before the decade ended.<sup>9</sup> Most alternative spaces were initially founded and run by artists much in Colab’s do-it-yourself spirit. Started primarily in opposition to commercial galleries, these low-cost, ad hoc, and actively programmed venues typically featured nonsalable conceptual, media-based, performance, and other experimental work. Groundbreaking spaces in New York included the Women’s Interart Center (1969), 98 Greene Street (1969), 55 Mercer (1970), 112 Workshop/112 Greene Street (1971), the Kitchen (1971), Institute for Art and Urban Resources (1971; later P. S. 1, 1976; and P. S. 1/MoMA since 1999), Artists Space (1973), 3 Mercer Store (1973), and many other spaces throughout the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> What is remarkable is how quickly alternative spaces were historicized. By 1981, the New Museum of Contemporary Art mounted the exhibition *Alternatives in Retrospect: An Historical Overview*. This was an early sign of the adaptability of physical art spaces, even if deemed alternative, to the art market and the art-history industry.

For Colab members in 1977, alternative spaces were historical in the worse sense. They had not only become part of the expanded art market, but they were no longer run by the artists who started them. As former Colab member Robin Winters stated:

Colab started in reaction to or in relation to P. S. 1, Creative Time, The Kitchen and Artists Space. . . . My basic thrust and opinion, which I still believe is that real estate and administration take too much money away from artists. Colab, as a group of 50 indigent maverick artists, supplied more money and more direct show space to more artists, with less funding, no real estate, and no administrative costs. This has been my political argument for years. I’m not against any of the spaces that are functioning and actually serving artists. The question is, how do you coalesce and get monies funneling directly to artists? Colab started with these issues and was formed in order to try to get a piece of the pie.<sup>11</sup>

Winters provides a clear sense of members’ opposition to alternative spaces and their strategic attempt to establish independent art distribution. This did not mean that they rejected alternatives outright. Many members showed in alternative spaces, such as Artists Space, when the opportunity presented itself, including Winters. But they did not want to be beholden to and limited by alternative spaces. Moreover, they were impatient with the alternatives’ new managerial class of arts administrators and curators who controlled the selection of work, and

9. For an outstanding summary of alternative spaces and artists’ organizations, see Julie Ault, “A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists’ Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965–85,” in *Alternative New York, 1965–1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, and New York: Drawing Center, 2002). See also Sally Webster, *A Report: Alternative Spaces and the Crises Threatening Their Survival* (New York: RoseWeb Projects, 1982).

10. Colab teamed with Fashion Moda, a second-generation alternative space started by Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis in the South Bronx, which was known for helping to spark the graffiti movement. In 1980 a faction of Colab members also helped found ABC No Rio at 156 Rivington Street on the Lower East Side.

11. Robin Winters, quoted in *5000 Artists Return to Artists Space: 25 Years*, ed. Claudia Gould and Valerie Smith (New York: Artists Space, 1999), 75.

Colab, *X Motion Picture Magazine* 1, no. 1, December 1977, front cover, offset printing on newsprint, 14½ x 12 in. (36.8 x 30.5 cm) (artwork © X motion picture; image provided by Michael McClard)

frustrated by what they perceived as resources wasted on real estate and overhead in general. This impatience rubbed both ways. An early administrator of the period, Helene Weiner, director of Artists Space from 1975 to 1980, described this new dynamic with artists as less cooperative and generous than their well-behaved predecessors.<sup>12</sup>

This situation motivated Colab to bypass alternative spaces and apply directly to funding agencies as a nonprofit organization. Anxious to distinguish itself from the alternative-space model of a bricks-and-mortar showcase of contemporary work, Colab developed a concept of an antihierarchical, artists-only organization that would serve as a hothouse for cultivating collaborative projects and would seek out flexible and multiple distribution outlets to reach audiences, from bars and movie houses to cable television and even alternative spaces. With a mixture of artists, interests, and political positions, Colab members quickly defined themselves as a “production-oriented” group that would make multimedia works and seek new distribution outlets for collective engagement with audiences. An early group statement explains:

We are functioning as a group of artists with complementary resources and skills providing a solid ground for collaborative work directed to the needs of the community-at-large. Specifically we are involved in programs facilitating development, production, and distribution of collaborative works.

These works will be realized in various media including film, video for distribution and cablecasts, and live cable TV broadcasts, as well as other more conventional art media such as graphics and printed materials.<sup>13</sup>

This statement defines three fundamental aspects of Colab—members’ desire to create and distribute “collaborative work” under the umbrella of an artist-run organization, their focus on new media versus traditional art objects, and their openness to a range of aesthetic styles that would meet the “needs of the community-at-large.” This last point was critical to the group’s identity and served as the foundation of a workshop-oriented administration that encouraged experimentation in many different areas, including but not limited to TV production, video editing, film, and performance. With various workshops operating simultaneously and the participants’ ability to draw on like-minded members as partners, Colab could produce many projects without the burden of an institutional identity.<sup>14</sup> Typically, individual members worked on more than one project in small subgroups that changed and overlapped from one project to the next. Michael McClard’s activities of 1978 were representative of a larger phenomenon: he coproduced and codirected *All Color News*, contributed artwork to two issues of *X Motion Picture Magazine*, produced a documentary of the punk music group the Contortions, served as sound recorder on Eric Mitchell’s film *Kidnapped* and second camera operator on Mitchell’s *Red Italy*, and organized *Exhibition A*, which displayed the work of eleven artists at Liza Bear’s Center for New Art Activities. With artistic flexibility a central feature of Colab’s mission, there was no obvious rationale for an overseeing director, board of trustees, or donor base. The only “constituency” for these organizers was a cadre of fellow artists who met, shared equipment, and developed projects under the moniker of the group.<sup>15</sup>

From March of 1977 through January of 1979, Colab members worked together to produce an extraordinary number of multimedia works in three

12. “By 1975 the alternative space system was prevalent . . . artists could become known. We were no longer doing them an enormous favor. When we started, we were all trying to make something happen; everyone was willing to compromise. As soon as the opportunities became available, people weren’t as generous.” Quoted in Deborah C. Phillips, “New Faces in Alternative Spaces,” *Art News* 80, no. 9 (November 1981): 98.

13. Although the document is undated, the use of the original group name, Green Corporation, indicates its approximate dating between March 1977 and September 1978.

14. Colab’s independent spirit and its method of dividing into working groups to investigate practical issues of concern as well as art are outlined in a 1977 grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts: “Special work groups . . . met . . . during this time: [they] include: Artists’ Equity, Cable TV Production, Group investigation of available working spaces for Green Corporation, Legality of Corporation, Tax Exemption, Film Group, Performance Group, Video Editing, Public Presentations, Publications, TV Ad Agency, All Color News. . . . We decided to become a production oriented organization, composed of artists who wished to produce their collaborative works themselves rather than have their work produced by someone else.”

15. Colab did assign group officers to meet the requirements of grant agencies, but the positions were largely symbolic, with little special power and only administrative responsibilities. Although Colab was critical of the administrative weight of alternative spaces, the members still had to develop ways to manage the group. They did so as fellow artists, sharing responsibility among members and within the group.



X MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE VOL. I NO. 1 DEC. 1977 50¢



CONTRIBUTORS

DIEGO CORTEZ Interviews Arturo Schwarz in Milan, June, 1976.

TERENCE SEVERINE, Notes on Pasolini's Salo, NYC., Jan. 1977

ERIC MITCHELL, 1977 Mass Homicide, NYC., 1977.

KATHY ACKER, A Movie Review by Janie Smith, from Blood and Guts in Highschool by Kathy Acker. To be continued

MICHAEL McCLARD, Esoterrorist Offensive, 6FPS S8, NYC., Oct. 1977.

DUNCAN SMITH & BETSY SUSSLER Marguerite Duras' The Truck, A Discussion, NYC., Oct. 1977.

JACKI OCHS, Between Shadow of Angels, Directed, Daniel Schmid Written and Produced, R.W.Fassbinder: Vienna, 1976.

MITCH CORBER & ALAN MOORE, Double Ghost, NYC., Oct. 1977.

JAMES NARES, Motion Pictures, NYC., Oct. 1977

JIMMY deSANA, Jack Smith Photo and layout, J. deSana, NYC., 1977.

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ASSEMBLED BY:  
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et Aillieur, 1970-75.

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Colab, *X Motion Picture Magazine* 1, no. 1, December 1977, back cover, offset printing on newsprint, 14½ x 12 in. (36.8 x 30.5 cm) (artwork © X motion picture; image provided by Michael McClard)

primary areas: publications, movies, and cable television. Members published two issues of *X Motion Picture Magazine*, produced no less than fifteen independent films, sponsored three cable programs, *All Color News*, *Red Curtain*, and *Nightwatch*, and opened a film house, the New Cinema, to screen selected members' films. These initial projects demonstrate a strong kinship with investigations by 1970s artists into art formats that fell outside the parameters of salable high art. Much of the work also reveals a hybridized aesthetic that borrows themes and visual techniques from a variety of sources, particularly punk's use of shock and new wave's interest in retro styles and high irony. Of course, a group of thirty to fifty artists is bound to display a multiplicity of styles and approaches. But even within this cacophony of styles, members seem to be in search of a format and aesthetic that could address the complex cultural reality of the period.

Colab's method of collaboration varied depending on the project, content, and participants. In a pre-Colab project, *X Motion Picture Magazine*, volume 1, number 1 (published in December 1977 and sold for 50 cents), one gets a sense of the varied ways Colab members would collaborate and of the punk aesthetic of their initial projects. Edited and self-published by Betsy Sussler, Eric Mitchell, and Michael McClard, selected members paid for their pages—sometimes working in pairs—and then produced the layouts as they wished. The resulting magazine appeared to be part film periodical, part art-zine. Its material construction and visual layout were crude, unfinished, amateurish, and self-consciously pasted together. And its homemade feel was authentic, as McClard, Mitchell, and Sussler assembled the inaugural issue by hand. (The issue consisted of two sheets, 22½ by 29 inches, folded in eighths to 11¼ x 7¼ inches.) Contributors submitted texts in different typefaces, from Courier to Helvetica, and conspicuously inserted handwritten editorial additions and corrections throughout their writings. Cheap black ink bled through the thin, inexpensive, and easily disposable newsprint paper. The contributors amplified the magazine's cut-and-pasted construction with unregistered lines, blurred ink, tilted photos, and overwriting.

The first *X Motion Picture Magazine* cover highlighted members' interest in French New Wave filmmakers and triggered the issue's overall theme. The cover shows three horizontal stills from a 1976 film by Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Anne-Marie Miéville, *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*), overlaid with a large, slashing X, a signature mark found on all the subsequent covers of the magazine as well. The film investigates the parallel lives of two families within separate political contexts, one French and the other Palestinian, contrasting the simultaneous experience of violent political action and passive bourgeois experience. The violent rupture between these two experiences, connected and yet distant from one another, is underscored through the use of an experimental technique mixing film and video. Even to those unfamiliar with the narrative of the film, the decontextualized stills on the magazine's cover possess an eerie familiarity of staple images representing terrorism and family life. The top still depicts three rifle-toting men whose faces are concealed by checkered Palestinian headscarves. Just below is a second still of a man and woman with two well-dressed little girls who watch television. The composition looks like a typical family portrait: the man and his wife sit on a couch with one daughter between them while the other daughter kneels in front. The setting is a banal living room with curtains drawn on the right side of the frame. The man, with disheveled hair and a mustache,



Michael McClard, *X Motion Picture Magazine* 2, no. 2–3, February 1978, front cover, offset printing on newsprint, 14½ x 12 in. (36.8 x 30.5 cm) (artwork © X motion picture; image provided by Tom Otterness)

sits with his right arm stretched across the back of the couch and his legs crossed in a relaxed, athletic pose. He looks straight out at the camera into the viewer's space with a pose of resolve, strength, and self-assurance. The wife, positioned on the opposite side of the couch, sits awkwardly with her arms crossed and held tightly against her midsection; she appears timid, protective, and fearful next to her husband. A third film still blurs slightly off the edge of the page, as if it were a fragment physically attached to the other two but without a discernible conceptual connection. The final layer of the X edits the "terrorists," leaving the family untouched—a violent cut securing a safe image. The themes and techniques of *Ici et ailleurs* preview Colab members' own media-based works, which question repeatedly how media images act on a public, how editing and broadcasting achieve certain ideological goals, and who controls images.

The stylistic influence of Europe's 1960s New Wave movement in film was quickly integrated with a more gritty and violent punk aesthetic, describing the mean streets of New York. Colab members mined punk's techniques and dark themes—S & M, torture chambers, renegade street gangs—for the next publication of *X Motion Picture Magazine* (volume 2, numbers 2 and 3, February 1978), which featured on its cover a found photograph of an Asian man with two swords forming an X in front of his chest.<sup>16</sup> These themes were explored in many members' films as well, most notably the movies of Scott and Beth B (or the Bs, as they were commonly known).<sup>17</sup> In *Black Box* (1978), for example, an innocent man walking the streets of New York at night is abducted by a crew of punks in black leather jackets and incarcerated within a black box at some unknown location. The box's design, constructed by Scott B, was based on a description in *Skeptik* magazine of a Brazilian torture chamber, the "Refrigerator," that, according to Scott B, "combined hot and cold, brightness and darkness, and loud noise and no noise. It's a combination of sensory overload and deprivation."<sup>18</sup> The box created physical as well as psychological stress for its victim. Audiences were given no reason for this character's torture, as he remains imprisoned without any apparent hope for escape. The critic Scott MacDonald summed up the film as "a parable about oppression," but if *Black Box* was a parable, one is left to ponder what moral principle is being illuminated, or if this is simply a prop for sadistic viewing pleasure. Is the box a metaphor for the claustrophobic and disciplinary spaces of contemporary urban cities? Is it an illustration of the gratuitous violence inflicted on victims of corrupt political systems? Audiences are left with these questions unresolved, but with a paranoid implication that some deeper agency, perhaps governmental, shapes these conditions.

Only a month after the second issue of *X Motion Picture Magazine*, Colab published its third and final issue with a shortened title, *X Magazine*, which continued the themes of violence, this time in the form of international terrorism. The cover showed an impenetrable gray brick wall overlaid with a yellow X and a word fragment in the top left-hand corner, "ed Brigade," a not-so-subtle reference to the German terrorist organization better known as the Baader-Meinhof gang or the Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Faktion; RAF). A mix of pop borrowings and oblique political critique, the issue included a send-up of Erica Jong's commercial success by Kathy Acker, "The Party Manifesto" by René Ricard, photographs of punk music stars Johnny Rotten and Anya Phillips by Jimmy de Sana, pseudoscientific charts of walking by Cara M. Brownell, photographs

16. This issue of *X Motion Picture Magazine* was done under the auspices of Colab and was ostensibly open to Colab members who were willing to pay to be included in the publication. Past members debate whether the magazine was truly open to all members or whether it was curated to include only members who were considered "good artists."

17. Colab funded B Movies, an independent movie company operated by members.

18. Quoted in Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Scott and Beth B," *October* 24 (Spring 1983): 14.

X MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE



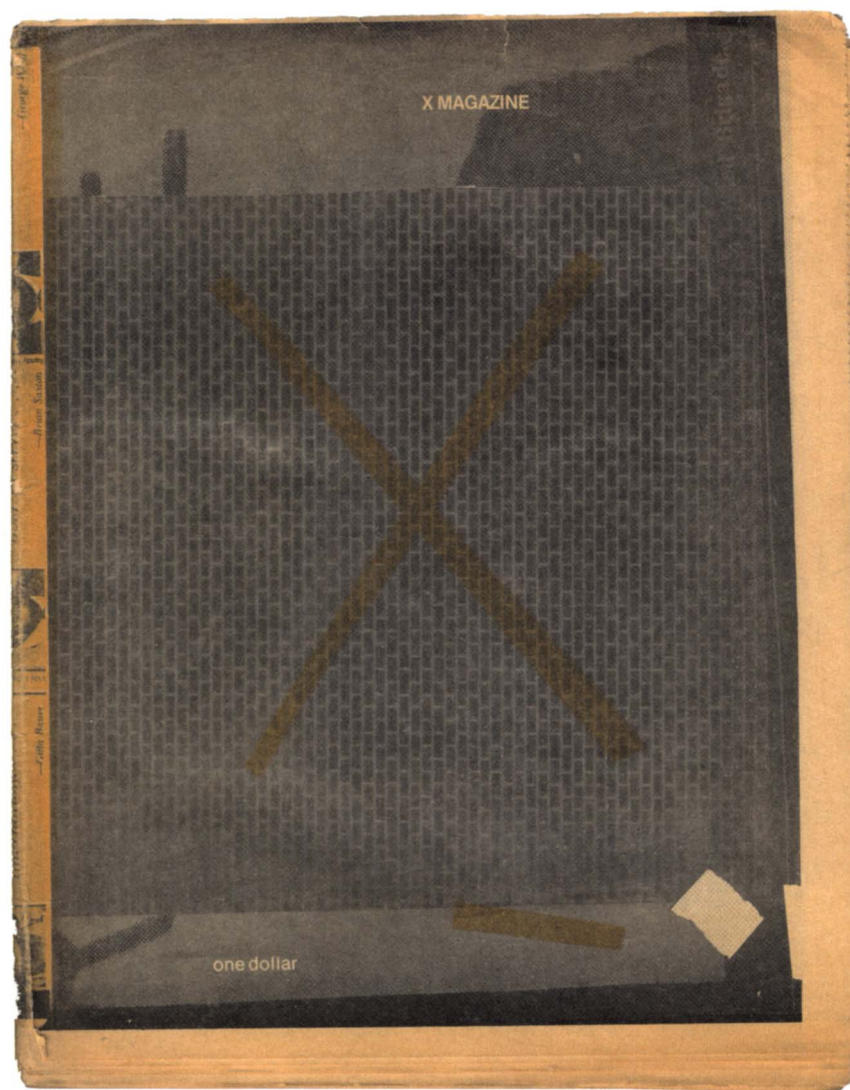
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VOL. 2 ISSUES 2&3 FEBRUARY 1978



Artist unknown, *X Magazine* 3-6, March 1978, front cover, offset printing on newsprint, 14½ x 12 in. (36.8 x 30.5 cm) (artwork © Collaborative Projects, Inc.; image provided by Tom Otterness)



of a German war prostitute by Tina Lhotsky, Jean Genet defending the Baader-Meinhof gang, and a dialogue between Diego Cortez and a man who claimed to be a Baader-Meinhof member. Cortez's interview symbolizes Colab members' deep mistrust for how media outlets, from mainstream television to magazines, covered events and individuals associated with the underground and political opposition. In coordination with the police, the media was perceived as just another means of enforcing and maintaining the oppression of the marginalized.

Colab's investigation of punk themes and terrorism is not surprising considering the milieu and culture its membership soaked up. What is unusual is how Colab members often deployed violent iconography and punk subculture to raise public consciousness of issues such as terrorism, government abuse, and oppression that were more international than community based. In many pages of *X Motion Picture Magazine* and in some independent Colab films, this approach appears overstylized, disingenuous, and simplistic. But a new, more effective form of visual and cultural shock therapy emerged in Colab's cable television program, *All Color News*, a one-hour news show that ran for twelve weeks



Colen Fitzgibbon, "Landlord Extortion," poster for *The Real Estate Show*, 1979, photocopy, 8½ x 11 (21.6 x 27.9 cm) (artwork © Colen Fitzgibbon; image provided by Alan Moore)



on Manhattan Cable Channel D starting in May 1977. *All Color News* sought to provide a "community news service" that covered "events affecting people who are not artists, as well as the art community."<sup>19</sup> This mission reflected a wider movement of 1970s activist collectives that used video production as a means to question the ideology that determined what was newsworthy and the type of information the three major networks proffered audiences via television.<sup>20</sup> Instead of repeating coverage of common stories found in the mainstream media—police shootings, high-profile murder cases, and local politics—*All Color News* devoted programming "to information on events that get little or no coverage in public news, and provides a critical investigation of current social structures through a collaborative news gathering team of artists."<sup>21</sup> Strategically, members aired images and stories that would make visible the information that mainstream press coverage commonly suppresses without evidence of erasure. This approach to news gathering critiqued the means through which the media not only ignored the "current social structures" but also helped to produce and manage them.

19. Quoted from Colab's National Endowment for the Arts grant application from 1977.

20. Other media-based artists also organized into collectives, such as Union, Video Freez, Top Value Television (TVTV), Raindance, and the Paper Tiger Collective, allowing them to share costs and video equipment and to solicit government grants as nonprofits. See DeeDee Halleck, "Watch Out, Dick Tracy! Popular Video in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez," in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 211–29.

21. Colab, National Endowment for the Arts grant application, 1977.

Colab claimed in grant applications that *All Color News* reached roughly 141,000 New York households, still a relatively modest audience by the standards of cable television and the internet today. But this audience exceeded that of *X Magazine* and consisted of people who would not have seen these short videos in an art space or specialized movie house. In addition, the television context lent the work authenticity. At first glance, *All Color News's* aims and statements suggest a form of guerrilla television that was popular in the early 1970s; members of TVTV, for example, covered the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 1972 in the documentary *Four More Years*. Drawing on the documentary tradition, Colab covered public and community events with a political agenda, but did so without the didactic and moral clarity typical of the genre. Many Colab-produced videos, like *X Motion Picture Magazine*, suggested that community problems were part of a larger system deeper and more complex than mere local politics. Members' videos deployed the same disorienting visual technique of pastiched images found in *X Motion Picture Magazine* layouts and addressed similar topics—the disenfranchised, terrorism, and the activities of legal and government authorities. Charlie Ahearn, for example, created a video with borrowed images that showed people traveling to work on the New York subway. It begins with a uniformed police officer standing guard in front of a subway car as passengers rush to enter the train, jostling and jamming their bodies against one another to fit into the tight, tubular space. A gruff and disconnected voiceover screams, “We want protection! We want protection!” A buzzing background sound evokes a chainsaw slicing through the steel subway car occupied by commuters or an accident breaking it in half. In other scenes, people from a cross-section of socioeconomic classes crowd together in a claustrophobic mob, yet they somehow remain oblivious to one another. The final sequence shows homeless men and women and exhausted office workers sleeping on the trains, spent after a long day. Again a distant and frustrated voice exhorts the passengers with propagandistic slogans, “Communicate . . . talk to each other.”

Tom Otterness produced a video that documented health-code violations in a Chinatown meat market. The film evolved by chance. While walking through Chinatown late one night, Otterness noticed rats rummaging about a local meat market, which supplied meat to restaurants throughout New York City. The next night Otterness, with Portapak in hand, returned to the market and filmed the rats as they scurried about the counters and machines where meat was cut and handled. His voice is heard in the background, “There they are! See them!” Later, Otterness showed the video to the New York public health commission. These and other videos produced for *All Color News* showed aspects of daily life in New York City elided from “regularly scheduled programming,” but they did not pretend to be objective, documentary accounts that revealed a final truth. Certainly, a message was aggressively and tendentiously presented to provoke heated responses from local cable viewers. But the subjective nature of the message was clear in the video's amateurish visual presentation. Most of the time, the video camera shakes, sometimes purposefully but also seemingly due to lack of control. The fast cuts from one scene to another eliminate any sense of temporal continuity; one could be moving from one day to the next or to a year later. The scratchy soundtrack and muffled background noises, such as the sounds of telephone calls or a skipping music recording of an indecipherable song, only

add to the visual cacophony. Together, the filming techniques and choppy narrative draw attention to the process of constructing narration; this lack of polish contrasts with the seamless technical product presented nightly on major network new programs. While these videos from *All Color News* share the visual techniques of disruption, muffled noise, amateurism, and pastiche with the Bs' films and the page layouts of *X Motion Picture Magazine*, they possess an activist motivation for social change that shows a shift away from some of the stylizing tendencies of other projects.

Several aspects of Colab's collective production become clear from these selected examples: members were deeply committed to the investigation of communications systems and to the potential of new technology to encourage collectivity and engage broader publics; members collaborated on works in multimedia formats (magazines, 8mm films, and cable television) that could not be sold as high-art objects; they bypassed typical art venues and often created their own; they drew from the punk milieu's visual techniques of photomontage and typographic experimentation and its themes (sodomasochism, violence, and nihilism) to critique mass culture and media and to comment on deteriorating social conditions in New York and internationally.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to imagine that such sustained and wide-ranging work could have been produced under any conditions other than within a collectively driven artists' organization.

Colab's move to bypass alternative spaces marks an important shift in the history of the spaces and the aims of artists' groups since the late 1960s. Colab's emergence called attention to the status of the alternative spaces as an expansion of the art market and offered a new option for artistic productivity. Equally important, Colab's formation marks a critical adjustment in the activities of post-1960s artists' groups. As Lucy Lippard has cogently summarized, in the late 1960s and early 1970s most artists' groups and independent activists focused their critiques on established museums, with direct protests for artists' rights, more diverse representation within collections, and politically engaged museums.<sup>23</sup> By the mid-1970s, groups shifted their critical attention to theorizing the parameters of art and its institutions, which continued throughout the 1980s via artists' installations, exhibitions, and "interventions" under the optimistic moniker of institutional critique.<sup>24</sup> In the midst of these two interweaving critiques by artists' group from the late 1960s to the 1980s, Colab was launched, its critical force located in the group's praxis as a model for the possibilities for a mixed-gender, democratic, nonhierarchical collective dedicated to collaboration.<sup>25</sup> Theory for Colab was a matter of production.

The Colab typically documented in art history books today was not born in May 1977, but in January 1979, when Colab members began to sponsor a series of open-invitation exhibitions in their apartments. These included *Batman Show*, organized by Diego Cortez (January 6 and 13, 1979); *Income and Wealth*, organized by Colen Fitzgibbon (February 1–March 5, 1979); *Doctors and Dentists Show*, organized by Robin Winters (February 3, 1979); *Dog Show*, organized by Robin Winters (March 24, 1979); and *The Manifesto Show*, organized by Colen Fitzgibbon and Jenny Holzer (May 1979). By September 1979, debates among Colab's membership led to a series of emergency meetings and a split into two factions: an existing "media" group dedicated to film and new technology and an emerging "space" group seeking to devote Colab resources to unjuried exhibitions. The

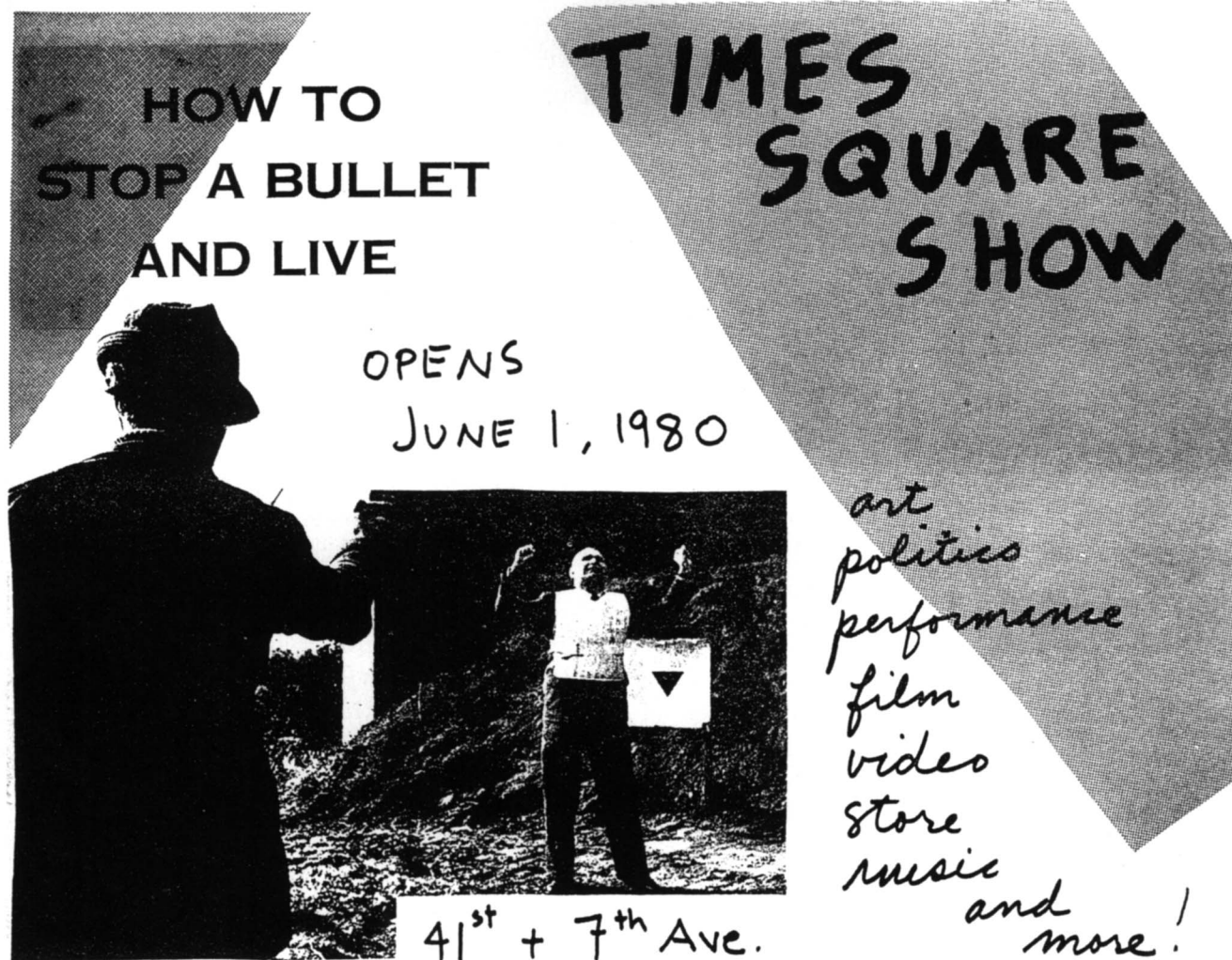
22. Again, these are selected examples, and this brief article does not capture all the artistic achievements of the women in the group and other members not mentioned. I am at work on a book that will examine the full scope of Colab's artistic activities and its development as a group up to the early 1980s.

23. See Lucy R. Lippard, "Biting the Hand: Artists and Museums in New York since 1969," in Ault, 79–120.

24. See Nancy Marmar, "Art and Politics, 77," *Art in America* 21, no. 4 (July–August 1977): 64–66.

25. Most artists' groups have few members, typically less than ten, which reflects a tendency toward more controlled and exclusive organizations. Colab is utterly unique among post-1960s collectives in its size, longevity, and democratic spirit. Colab counted thirty to fifty artists among its membership, remained active for some seven years, and maintained a rotating group of officers and voting rights for all members on all issues. In addition, Colab was one of the first successful mixed-gender groups, with 50 percent women members, many in key leadership positions. Several women's groups grew out of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as WAR (1969) and Heresies (1975), but typically they counted only women among their members. Last but not least, Colab was one of the few groups to seriously devote itself to artistic collaboration in practice, making it a centerpiece of the collective's work.





Artist unknown, "How to Stop a Bullet and Live," poster for *Times Square Show*, photocopy, 8½ x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm) (image provided by Alan Moore)

space group dominated the group's activities in the 1980s, and Colab's history has been written to date by its main advocates within the membership. A lesson can be derived from the initial historical reception of Colab and alternative spaces alike: received histories follow the money, generating narratives that lead to an individual, an object, and a space to display the goods. So it goes for the collective.

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