

FINANCIAL TIMES

One for all: artists who get it together

Collectives | Griselda Murray Brown investigates an alternative way for artists to organise and create

Why do artists form collectives? There are almost as many reasons as there are collectives.

Some are tight-knit creatively; others are looser affiliations of artists with their own practices who come together for specific projects.

Collectives are popular with young artists without gallery representation or financial means, for whom sharing resources and costs is crucial. Funding applications and marketing can be time-consuming; being part of a collective lightens the load. By harnessing diverse talents, groups of artists can realise more ambitious projects than they could do alone.

Of course, it's not just about sharing costs but ideas, too. As Alexander Provan, editor of Triple Canopy magazine, tells me from New York, "It's lonely to make work all by yourself all the time. For me, it's extremely stimulating to have a group of people you can reliably exchange ideas with, people who will be supportive of what you're doing but also critical when necessary."

Provan will host a panel discussion on artists' collectives at Frieze New York next week. It will feature Abdullah Al-Mutairi of GCC, a group whose name puns on the Gulf Cooperation Council

and whose photography, video and sculpture pokes fun at ministerial pomp, drawing attention to the Gulf region's rapid transformation.

Jamal Cyrus of Otabenga Jones & Associates will also join the discussion at Frieze. Cyrus is one of four black artists based in Houston who produce work as Otabenga Jones, an imaginary conceptual artist and historian named after Ota Benga, a real-life African pygmy who was brought to the US in 1904 and exhibited at the Bronx Zoo.

As Provan sees it, there are now so many different kinds of collective that "there's almost no choice but to think twice about what it means to be one". While the first collectives of 1960s usually defined themselves against the corporation, many of today's artist-run groups work on capitalist models. New York's Still House Group began in 2007 as a website for young artists to exhibit their work. Comprising eight permanent members, the group now operates from a warehouse in Brooklyn and employs a team of staff. They stage selling exhibitions and show at art fairs, and their first UK show took place this year at London's Zabludowicz Collection. It is reported that Still House Group grosses between \$3m and \$5m a year – enough to sustain a mid-level New York gallery. The collective model, however, is not



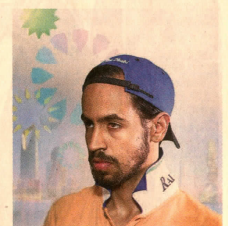
From top: pieces from 'It's the Wall World' (2014) by Chim-Pom; members of the collective in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in a video still from the project. Right: Abdullah Al-Mutairi of GCC

necessarily an alternative to gallery representation. The artists of Still House Group do not make art together; in fact, they do not call themselves a collective. In market terms, artworks made collaboratively tend to be less valuable than those made by individuals. This might be because the idea of the star artist – someone revered for his or her unique genius – is not easily applied to a group. Perhaps, too, the art produced by collectives tends to be less easily commodified: these are ephemeral happenings rather than art objects. The London

emerging artists called *By the Mountain Path*. When I ask about their response to Fukushima, Ryuta Ushiro, the leader of the group, tells me, "Japan was in a panic. There are many artists in Japan but almost all lost confidence: they feel art is very very useless in front of such a big reality. We discussed in Chim-Pom meeting and we agreed we wanted to do something to prove [to future generations] that art is not powerless."

The group is close; they meet twice a week to discuss ideas and, though they have disagreements, decisions are always unanimous. Despite their insistence that they are "just artists, not activists", they are united in their commitment to make art about the world around them.

Chim-Pom have achieved recognition in their 10 years, with a solo show at MoMA PS1 in New York in 2011 and another at London's Saatchi Gallery this September, as well as numerous exhibitions in Japan. They are represented by the Tokyo gallery Mujin-to Production, and sell to private collectors as well as museums, including The National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, the Asia Society Museum in New York and Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. But



Chim-Pom do not live off their art: the three members I meet have other jobs, including teaching and design work. For the moment, at least, forming a collective will not make you rich.

Back at White Rainbow, Chim-Pom are installing what looks like a giant jigsaw mural. They cut the pieces from walls in the places they visit: a restaurant in Hiroshima, a rural shack in Bangladesh, a Tokyo slum house. The result, called "It's the Wall World", juxtaposes separate realities, drawing connections between them: a jigsaw piece from an antique crate used to ship tea from India that they found in Liverpool slots into a piece from a Bangladeshi *chai* house. The jigsaw is taken apart and reconfigured for different exhibitions, growing larger all the time.

It's a simple, striking piece that speaks not only of the messy diversity of the world but perhaps also of the group who made it. As Ushiro says, "We are six members, and six members is already a society."

This loud patchwork of ideas could be a metaphor for the collective itself.

'Next Top Models: New Forms for Artists' Collectives, Frieze New York, May 14. friezeprojects.org
'By the Mountain Path', White Rainbow, London, to June 20. white-rainbow.co.uk