

Conversation with Francesco Spampinato about working as collective

Questions:

1. Why work collaboratively?
2. How do you determine membership? Does physical location matter in this regard?
3. If considered separately, how do your individual artistic practices contribute to or detract from your work as a group?
4. How are decisions made?
5. Does each of you have a clearly defined role? If so, what are some of each member's distinct responsibilities?
6. How important is each group member's individuality, both in terms of your artistic production and in terms of your relationship with the media? Does anonymity come into play?
7. What is the relationship between your working methods and your art's "content?" In this sense, does technology tend to play more of a supporting role, or does it lead you in new directions?
8. How does your collaboration relate to its cultural, institutional, and commercial contexts? In other words, how would you respond to those who call this a trend?
9. Who is your audience?
10. Does your engagement with one another translate into an engagement with them? How so?

avaf: First let me explain how it is for us to work collaboratively. We used to refer to ourselves as a “collective” but we stopped using this term in the past few years – now we say we are a “duo” which sometimes morphs into a “collective” depending on the project we are working on at that moment. Initially we didn’t want to make this clear because we were more concerned about hiding our identities (and the collaborators’) under the avaf moniker (just recently we relaxed about this and assumed that we are indeed a duo with occasional collaborators). We wanted people to focus on the work and not on an individual’s personality. This is one of the reasons we started distributing custom avaf masks in our events/openings/performances – not only to fuse viewer and environment together but also to avoid singling out people for who they are or what they have done. We want the installations to be inclusive and not exclusive. We want the work to be experienced fully and free from as many preconceptions as possible. We want engagement and deliverance – an anonymity has always been always one of our tools to set this in motion in our projects.

The avaf acronym is somehow a call to action – our utopian idea is that people can “assume” assume vivid astro focus and start making avaf works on their own (without us even knowing) and thus, in our view, becoming a collaborator. We conceived our “decals” series with that in mind (“decals” are single elements often present in our wallpaper pieces; the collector decides how these works are going to be manifested – they choose the size and the substrate the decals will be printed on, they can change colors, they decide how many will be printed, etc – this way the collector ultimately also becomes a collaborator).

Christophe Hamaide-Pierson is the other fix avaf member, a long time friend of mine who I met right when I moved to New York fourteen years ago in 2008. Christophe used to live in NYC but moved to Paris in 2000. We only started working together in 2005 (on the occasion of our “Homocrap” installation at MOCA, L.A.) and since then he is the only other person who has been involved in every aspect of our

work and in every single project since then. We never lived in the same city since we started working together. For this reason physical location has never been an issue for us (and this is true also for other collaborators we have worked with in the past). E-mail is our recurrent communication tool.

Me and Christophe have some peculiarities in our “working together but being apart” process – we never talk on the phone, we never skype. But we exchange emails about our ideas and stuff we are working on all the time. We often describe new aesthetics in our work in words. We also exchange a lot of visual references through email. Internet of course has made all of this feasible, fast and relatively simple.

There are two parallel types of working collaboratively inside our practice. The first one is the email exchange work I do with Christophe on a daily basis (as mentioned above). We also install, obviously, most of the projects together – which is one of the rare moments we are physically working together (sometimes we spend a year without seeing each other). We are the only ones who deal directly with curators, galleries, museums, press, manufacturers, etc.

The other kind refers to the way we work with our collaborators – a working process that has in fact many similarities with a curatorial process. Choosing collaborators we will work with depends, first and foremost, on some sort of emotional connection with them – that is why we only work with people we are friends with. Certainly the collaborators’ skills are also decisive on how we will be working together and for which exhibition. We choose collaborators on a project basis. And it is us (me and Christophe) who decide how that person will be participating. This is when the curatorship aspect in our work becomes more apparent. In general the first step is to present our ideas and concepts for a specific show to a collaborator. We often talk about how we are occupying the space, which other collaborators we will be working with, the connections between the different works, what we expect from the collaborator’s contribution. From that point onwards we have basically three forms of working with other artists. The first kind is when we work hand in hand with the collaborator – that of course depends on all of us being physically present during the production of the piece (which is not so common). Another kind is when we contaminate the collaborator with our ideas, and he/she reacts to these ideas and develops a work that fits in the general context. The third kind is when we choose an artist’s existing work and curate it in the show along with other works.

We like to suggest new directions to the collaborators and often propose challenges for their practice. This represents some sort of interference in their work and I guess it is the reason why we hardly ever collaborate with established artists (Kenny Scharf is the only exception as far as I remember).

It is also important for us to blend together the works by the different collaborators so everything becomes one cohesive installation – and me and Christophe create the connecting thread. I could say that this is our most basic function in this collaborative process: we are the connectors. Connecting is, for us, one of the most gratifying elements of working collaboratively and definitely one of the reasons to do it. A similar gratification that I suppose a curator has when putting up a show. But in our case we are also creators.

I could single out my role in avaf as the igniter and the voice. I’m the one speaking in lectures, giving interviews, writing statements, etc. I’m more often in charge of production and the one who is dealing directly with the manufacturers. In general I’m the one who sets things in motion.

Because of the way we “separately work collaboratively”, both of us often work on our own in our studios. In my case at least all the work that I individually make is avaf, I make no distinctions. For many years now, most of the work we produce on a daily basis is for a specific upcoming project so we always

create for its specific cultural, institutional and commercial contexts and we morph accordingly. The flexibility of our practice provide us with a smooth transition between different contexts most of the times.

Nowadays it is very common and easy for people to connect and work together virtually. So I wouldn't call collaboration a trend in the "hype" sense of the word. In my point of view is a much more spontaneous consequence of the tools (communication, production tools) that are out there today.

In regards of our audience: I wish our audience was broader and more varied. Unfortunately most of the time we reach people who are at least interested in the art world if not already inserted in it in one way or another. There is a "classism" about this that bothers us. It is harder to reach people who are not expecting to be reached. The environments in galleries and museums are also contrived and demand an obedience that doesn't really fit in our projects (and we often have trouble with institutions because of their safety rules for instance). On the other hand, every single project we have done in the public sphere has been the most fulfilling. In these cases we are able to reach out to people who otherwise would never be exposed to us. The public sphere brings an otherworldly character to the unexpected. And at same time you need to transmit confidence to people to guarantee their participation, engagement and deliverance. This viewer doesn't necessarily know who you are, where you come from, what you usually do, and nevertheless they are there bringing your piece to life. The power of providing unexpected trust.