

Esprit de Corps

by Silvia Bombardini



Samantha Conlon – Bunny Collective

In the age of individualism, of statutory amour-propre, the *collective* as an entity or qualifier for that which is "of, done by, or characteristic of individuals acting in cooperation", inherently becomes defiant. For those who wish to present themselves as an alternative to the status quo, sometimes the terminology is all that matters. As Vestoj's Anja Aronowsky Cronberg points out in her critical reading of the *Vetements Phenomenon*: "*here the ubiquitous and ever anonymous behind-the-scenes staff, a staple of every fashion house, become 'a collective' and the insider is transformed into an outsider by virtue of 'whiffs from the underground'*". But even if the buzzword is sometimes liberally adopted, the reasons to argue in favour of diffusion of collectivism as creative practice still are many, and to police it, surely, would be failing its ultimate inclusive purpose. Beside the resolve to reject or weaken hierarchical models of authority or authorship – a resolve at least partially undermined, in Vetements' case, by Gvasalia's solitary ascent at the helm of Balenciaga – a great part of the romantic appeal of the collective as an ideal, is its resistance to the capitalist priorities that have been assimilated in modern times by all sites of production, creative fields included. The art collective, in its purest form, is fervently intangible. According to *The Temporary Separatists*, a feminist art/research group, it values communities over commodities: "*collectivism can be a way to rethink what artistic practice is and can be [...]*"

focused on process rather than product". This process as well, by which the collective's members fulfil their creative potential, individually and as a group, could be considered an act of labour as per Hannah Arendt's distinction between labour and work – where the former is ephemeral and indispensable and the latter committed to goods and profits. Arendt's seminal text, *The Human Condition*, was one of the inspirations behind a recent public exhibition by the girls of the Bunny Collective, set in a woodland park. *"The essential, fleeting and necessary nature of Arendt's definition complimented the ephemeral, one-day structure of the show"* says Bunny member Aoife O'Dwyer, *"the product (artworks) were consumed almost as quickly as they were produced"*. Also, *"it's true that we also wanted to address the commodification of female 'work'"*.

The archetypal collective, indeed, is most often female. Some have ventured the hypothesis that this may be due to a biological advantage: that women may just be better equipped, by virtue of supposed nurturing tendencies, to care for and support one another in groups. Most of these groups, though, would rather make a case for the equality of the sexes, from a position akin to Judith Butler's theory – that gender isn't something one is, but something one does. In this context, the formation of female-only collectives could seem a contradiction, as it asserts the gender divide that most feminism exists against. What they are, however, is functional. For in the creative fields, as in most fields, women are not being granted the same opportunities as men, and as The Temporary Separatist's name suggests, equity needs to be reached *before* equality can become the norm. When the choice is between either being invisible or being labelled, exclusively female spaces opt for the latter, as they attempt to give back some of those opportunities that were lost. As techno producer Paula Temple puts it in an interview with [The FADER](#), *"maybe when we reach the point where sidelining, gaslighting, denying, undermining, taking over, reductionism, hostile environments and sexual harassment have disappeared, there would be less of a reason to create all-female projects"*. Paula's label, Noise Manifesto, vows to feature at least 50% artists who identify as trans, female, woman, non-male, non-conforming or queer. But how can equality, eventually, ever become the norm? On a [2015 panel](#) about women art collectives, author and lecturer Angela Dimitrakaki argued that separatism can only be effective when it grows to such a scale that a network of outsides, namely the feminist collectives, is able to threaten the inside, i.e. the patriarchal society. This might have sounded quixotic once, but in the 21st century, fourth-wave feminism has a powerful ally – the internet.

Much has been written about girls' empowerment online. No longer in need of IRL roots, indigenous groups, communities and collectives gather spontaneously and multiply on the digital playground. Creative young women find safe corners and alike minds on Tumblr, Instagram or Twitter: if there's no space for them yet in real-life galleries or stages, the internet provides, for free, immediate exposure and worldwide reach. This doesn't just mean personal fame for the artist herself or her collective. More importantly, it leads to a virtually boundless rise in awareness concerning the issues fourth-wave artists address in their work, such as sexism, racism, or mental health. The honesty and keenness of their approach educates a new generation of women with the framework, backup and tools to creatively question conditioning. Experiences are shared, ideas and values spread. This use of separatism as Dimitrakaki suggests, not to infiltrate and disrupt the system, but as part of a more long-term plan to circumnavigate and overtake it, would appear to have influenced, whether directly

or not, the overall aesthetic of the fourth wave movement as well. Where *grrrls* of the third or previous waves would have favoured a masculine outlook aimed to blur boundaries and defy gender stereotypes, fourth-wave feminists embrace in turn the sugary sweet palette of unapologetic femininity. Girlhood is glorified: what was previously seen as weak is revealed to be strong. If female is indeed something one does, these artists wear performativity as a badge of honour.

Though the logic seems sound, not everyone is equally convinced. In its effort to reclaim the female body, for instance, recent feminism could surely be said to have perpetrated its overexposure. There's a fundamental difference between the hypersexualised image of a young woman in mainstream media, and the hazy #freethenipple selfie of another young woman, who lets you know that her body is her own, to enjoy and share as she pleases – but it's often too nuanced to pick up at first glance, and online, there's rarely any time to linger. Often described as cosmetic, vapid or vain, the very medium that birthed the fourth wave movement, the web, could have come to predate it of its depth. *"[The female] figure is the cornerstone of a project initially aimed at breaking down these kind of expectations"* reasons Camille Lévêque of the LIVE WILD collective, *"far from saying these works aren't necessary, one has to admit we keep seeing the same thing, works that are, in the end, captive of the very institution they criticize"*. At best, if the message gets through, is still one that confines women's empowerment to their bodies rather than their minds, unwittingly buying into a patriarchal system of values. An L.A.-based Instagram artist, Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory takes on another fourth-wave dilemma: *"I felt kind of alienated by contemporary feminism, because it demanded so much of me (self-love, great sex, economic success) that I just couldn't give"* she told [Dazed](#), *"I feel like girls are being set up: if we don't feel overjoyed about being a girl, we are failing at our own empowerment [...]. Global misogyny isn't the result of girls' lack of self-care or self-esteem"*. What Audrey proposes is that girls' sadness, their sorrow and pain, should be witnessed as an act of protest, a gesture of liberation that unites women across the world and ages. By endorsing emotionality over violence as a way to express dissent, Sad Girl Theory aligns itself clearly with the fourth wave movement, but the compromise it offers resonates more candidly with the on- and offline struggles of many young women today. The paradigm of the sad girl, herself, recurs in the chosen names for many relatively new female collectives across the planet: there's the Sad Asian Girls Club in the U.S., the Sad Grrrls Club in Australia, and Sad Girl Cinema in the UK, to name a few.

Indeed, the web both fosters and flattens a growing number of women's collectives in various creative fields, whose priorities may not always reconcile, yet it's in their very multitude that lies the potential to become true agents of change. But as necessary to their mission as proliferation is, it does come at a price. We do live in capitalist times – when girl gangs can become a trend, the saccharine aesthetic of fourth wave feminism is easily commodified, and the overuse of the word *collective* might cause it to lose some of its meaning. Take Acne Studios' pre-fall 2016 collection. Creative director Jonny Johansson explained to [The Business of Fashion](#) *"that he had wanted to look at the period of life when individuality is best expressed as part of a group"*. His line offered five practical options: Fanzine Girls, the Country Cool group, Neo Acid Post Post DJs, the Kill Bill Plaid gang or Evil Teenage Squad – something for all tastes, ready for consumption. It's not always easy these days, for young

female artists and their collectives, to keep frustration at bay and their hearts pure. But let's keep in mind that there hardly ever was anything more resourceful, or more stubborn, than a girl with both purpose and peers.

LIVE WILD

"Most of our works are thought of as 'exquisite cadavers'. Which was a favourite expression amongst the surrealists and is a form of collage" explains Camille Lévêque, LIVE WILD's founder. "Most of us are from mixed background. We all take pride in our family history and collage is the perfect way to express this, as it is the literal illustration of what we are. Collages". The seven artists in her collective are presently based in Canada, France, Belgium, Armenia and the U.S., though some have grown up in Lebanon, Ukraine and Russia.

"Collage, Naïve art, Art Brut, are considered lowbrow art practices which I find ridiculous. All the instinctive art forms have always been criticized, as if a rigorous art education was necessary to produce an art piece. We adore movements like Dada or later Fluxus, which mocked everything, questioned everything within the art institutions and challenged the role of artists, curators or gallerists". "Obviously we don't take ourselves too seriously" she adds, "that doesn't mean we lack depth".

What does lack depth, from Camille's point of view, is a lot of contemporary feminist art, a label LIVE WILD strive to disentangle themselves from. *"The current trend around body empowerment is a fight fought with the wrong weapons. It's too literal" she says, "while understanding the assumption that female artists would produce 'feminist works', I find it very annoying. Artists should be free to either produce body of works that are absolutely detached from who they are and where they come from, as well as works that are exclusively introspective".* All of them being women, she insists, is a coincidence not a statement.

What they seem rather more interested in, is bringing the art world down a notch. Not just by ways of collages, but by fully endorsing the web: *"People seem to be shy around it, and fear to be stigmatized or discredited I think. But the internet is so much more interesting than any gallery in terms of showcase. Just like the artists of Dada and Fluxus were pushing back galleries and museum to focus on alternative options to exhibit their work, our platform allows us to present a strong visual identity that defines us individually and as a whole".*

BUNNY COLLECTIVE

"Feminist communities have changed a lot since we began Bunny" admits Samantha Conlon, who started the collective in 2013, "you have to be really careful which opportunities you say yes or no to, I feel a lot more cautious". "As this wave of feminism started to grow, so too did the offers of 'collaboration' from for-profit

companies who approach artists and collectives with the promise of 'exposure'" continues fellow artist Aoife O'Dwyer, "we are taught to be grateful for every nugget of attention given to us by the mainstream, but it's important to evaluate that everything you produce truly does lift and hold up the point you are trying to make. This is easier said than done, but it's definitely something Bunny is conscious of with each project we consider". But not all of it is for the worst either, as Sam points out, "the positive side of the media capitalising on feminism is that there are a lot more people exposed to the message, willing to engage with the dialogue we're working through within our shows".

This is all the more obvious when you look up Bunny's size. Started as a local project for female artists in the UK and Ireland, the group now counts eighteen young women under its wing, and promises to spread further. *"I want Bunny to work as a sort of shapeshifting community, I want to open it worldwide and make it more inclusive" she says, "next up, I imagine Bunny moving from the idea of a group of static members to an open entity". "One thing all the members have in common is the desire to create work that is honest and in many cases very personal. There is a huge feeling of support and encouragement within the group" adds Aoife, "there is always a shared sense of community and that we are all working towards the same goal".*

With their latest exhibition this was *"a desire to refocus on a topic that is less celebrated within the current art market and even within the feminist art scene. Very often shows are centred around ideas about gender, femininity and the body, and although a lot of our past projects have had this focus too, we felt it was time to try to produce a show that was slightly more abstract and that looked at the female experience from a slightly different angle".* Titled *What we are doing*, the exhibition took place for a single day in May, in the woodland of Alexandra Park in Manchester.

BALTI GURLS

Communities no longer need to be rooted in a physical place, but some still are, and proudly. Cue in Balti Gurls from Baltimore, Maryland: a female collective of local black and brown artists, founded in late 2014 by Jenné Afiya. *"Half of our members are Baltimore natives and the other half are long term residents. Our creative community, and the city at large, is never far from our minds" she says. "We live in a city and a nation plagued by inequality, but the amount of people who have been willing to listen has been very encouraging".*

"Meeting face to face has been incredibly important to us growing and evolving as a group. Nothing is better than getting in a room and feeling everyone's energy and coming up with ideas. This has allowed for a lot of collaboration, but also for dialogue and discussion. So much of what we do it about us getting together as asking ourselves 'What do we want to see?' or 'What do we feel is missing?'. There is this amazing process we go through together every time we put on an event. From idea generation to production, and there isn't often a lot of outsourcing".

What they felt was missing are events the likes of BLK LUV, held in February at Baltimore's Penthouse Gallery – a showcase of artworks by women of colour, featuring music, performance, and a love-letter writing station. Or EDGE CONTROL, now in its third instalment, that highlights the talent of female musicians and DJs of colour.

“Also the imagery and visual elements of the party solely reference black and brown beauty culture” Jenné adds, *“snippets of music videos or magazine spreads ranging from the 1970s to the 2000s, with girls clad in large hoop earrings, gold teeth, and acrylic nails”*.

We've seen how modern feminism is now being capitalised upon, but black culture has been for decades.

“‘Culture mining’ is just something you get used to as a woman of colour” tells Jenné. *“Either you ignore it or get upset every time you encounter the Rachel Dolezal's of the world. You can't stop people from ‘appropriating’, but you can claim something as your own and demand it to be respected. So young women of colour in the Baltimore area show up to EDGE CONTROL and feel celebrated”*.

SIREN

“We're very aware that SIREN as a collective is greater than the sum of its parts, in that what we can achieve supporting one another is much more than we could achieve on our own. It's also cool to share the credit and resist the cult of individualism and competition that often comes with DJing” SIREN, who fittingly opt to speak as one, are a young collective of nine London-based female DJs and producers. SIREN will only celebrate their first birthday in January – with *“a big event”*, they promise – but have kept themselves busy over the past few months, and already got their voice heard well past the British shores. *“We're most proud that people from across the UK and beyond (!) have reached out to us and said that they've been inspired”* they say, *“it seems that what we're doing has affected people in a real way, and the momentum behind what we are trying to achieve is being picked up elsewhere”*.

Still, SIREN is another example of a collective firmly grounded in their offline milieu, and that's despite the fact that it's out of a social media post that the collective started. *“Most of the collective are from London, or studied here. This has given us a local perspective on the issues we have with the scene here, and SIREN started as a response to these”* say SIREN, and *“we run our parties on a very small-scale and DIY vibe, which is inherently local. Once any event grows too big that can easily be lost. However we're really grateful that we can connect with femmes all over the country via online spaces and our radio shows”*.

It's true that such online spaces have multiplied in recent years. A pioneer among them is female:pressure, *an international network of over 1700 female artists from 66 countries in the wider fields of electronic music & arts*, active since 1998. But to make sure ideals translate to practice, IRL events are key. And so, SIREN believe, are all-female line-ups: *“they wouldn't be needed if we lived in a world free of structural oppression where women, non-binary people and men were booked in equal proportions. However, we don't anticipate that a world without*

oppression is just round the corner, so until then there will be a need to showcase those artists who are excluded for structural reasons”.

OOMK

“We wanted OOMK to function as a space where women, especially Muslim women, could share their work with each other in a nurturing environment where creativity can flourish” OOMK, short for One Of My Kind, are Sofia, Heiba and Rose. Five issues ago, they began to publish their eponymous zine. “We wanted our friends to be involved and we wanted it to be about women and art. We wanted to print lots of copies so that we could share it with people and sell it at zine fairs” recalls Sofia, “we hoped that women would read it and want to submit content for the next issue”.

This happened. First launched in 2013, OOMK has grown into a comprehensive collective of around fifteen young women, keen to present an authentic alternative to the misrepresentation of girls, Muslim and non, that’s so widespread in mainstream media. *“We do consider OOMK to be a feminist publication but we don’t see it solely as that” she says, “for us it’s really important to move the emphasis towards the thoughts, work and beliefs of women which are so often overlooked in favour of our appearance”.*

Zines, as a format, were supposed to be slowly on their way to extinction ever since the dawn of the blogosphere in the early 2000s. And yet, they might just be on the rise once more. *“It definitely feels like zines have increased in popularity over the last few years, more writers and artists are turning to the medium to share their work and people in general are using zines to express themselves and to highlight issues they feel passionately about” Sofia agrees. “We’ve held a lot of zine fairs over the years and more and more we’re seeing attendees come back as stall holders. There is so much collaboration that happens and rather than being slower, because it’s IRL, I think it actually allows people to make real connections”.*

They’re proof of this: *“We learned so many things working on OOMK. How to build relationships with lots of different types of people and collaborate with other groups, and just what it means to build a community around a project”.*

RED LIGHTER FILMS

“The inspiration for Red Lighter stemmed my frustrations as a queer actress struggling to find creatively fulfilling work. When I moved to L.A. I was taking on film roles that were misogynistic and painfully one-dimensional. Often times, the crews on these films were composed entirely of white men and I was starting to feel disillusioned

with the whole experience” says Chloe Feller, who started Red Lighter Films with her girlfriend Hobbes Ginsberg “in an effort to combat the pervasive oppressiveness of the film industry”. “We’ve grown a bit exhausted with trying to succeed within a system that wants nothing to do with us” agrees Hobbes, “we want to create alternative pathways to success, based on mutual support and progressive content. The end goal though is to grow big enough that we’re able to pose a threat to traditional networks. We want to be in theatres and we want to make big budget movies, we just want to get there on our own terms”.

The issue of discrimination in Hollywood is nothing new to the academic circles, but it’s only very recently that production companies like the Dollhouse Collective, Pacific Standard or A Fine Romance have started to address the issue in practical terms. And it might still be too early to celebrate. *“The discourse surrounding discrimination in Hollywood is becoming more prominent”* Chloe concedes, *“I think, perhaps, the film industry is right on the brink of moving in a more progressive, representative direction. But it’s important not to get too complacent with baby steps”.* *“All of these new ‘feminist’ production companies are started and run by rich white women who are using these platforms to raise up other white women and capitalise on the fact that audiences are hungry for progressive media”* adds Hobbes. *“As we enter this time of ‘change’, it’s really important that we demand more”.*

And there’s a lot of good that the film industry could do. Cinema, perhaps more than any other art, may be responsible for many of the stereotypes that plague us. But its great reach also implies a great potential to spread messages of inclusion and diversity. Here, in Hobbes’ words, is how Red Lighter does it: *“when you’re creating media that is meant to represent marginalized voices, it’s imperative that you have those marginalized voices involved in every step of the filmmaking process. Our most recent film, All-Encompassing and Everywhere, is a story about dealing with depression and the aftermath of trauma, and everyone involved from the writer to the producers, directors and actors have dealt first hand with these experiences. That lends itself to a nuanced and humanized portrayal that can be both cathartic and empowering”.*