



Taxpayers in the next-to-top fifth gained 25%.

Taxpayers in the top fifth gained 54%.

Taxpayers in the second fifth gained 13%.

The poverty line is set at \$12,060 for a family of four in 2005. It is adjusted for inflation from the 1963 level of \$7,044. The poverty line is not a measure of the number of Americans in poverty, but a measure of the country's economic health. It is defined as the minimum income needed to afford a basic subsistence standard and has been used since 1963. It is not a measure of the country's economic health. It is defined as the minimum income needed to afford a basic subsistence standard and has been used since 1963. It is not a measure of the country's economic health. It is defined as the minimum income needed to afford a basic subsistence standard and has been used since 1963.

A fundamental task in the ongoing effort to measure poverty is whether poverty is defined by income or by consumption. The latter is a more comprehensive measure of poverty, but it is more difficult to measure. The former is easier to measure, but it is less comprehensive. The latter is a more comprehensive measure of poverty, but it is more difficult to measure. The former is easier to measure, but it is less comprehensive.

and the Social Business Section of the American Business Council. The Social Business Section of the American Business Council is a non-profit organization that promotes social business. It is a non-profit organization that promotes social business. It is a non-profit organization that promotes social business.

April 3, 2006
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COLLECTING AND COLLECTIVITY

cover image:
Julie Ault and Martin Beck
Installation,
Secession
2006

COLLECTING
AND
COLLECTIVITY

COLLECTIVITY IN A WORLD OF COLLECTORS

Team SHaG (Amy Sillman, David
Humphrey, Elliot Green)
Untitled, 2004
15x11 inches
mixed media on paper



In the history of art, the word “collectivity” readily brings to mind a heady brew of yesterday’s avant-gardism. Constructivism. dada. Surrealism. CIAM. Internationale Situationniste. Actionism. Fluxus. Woman House. ACT UP. It is a long litany that, temporally speaking, begins to unravel somewhere around 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The flurry of written manifestoes and fervent activities made these groups bearers of a message. The avant-garde, historic and neo- gave voice: it made cohesive bodies politic. With the fall of the Wall, the demise of a counterbalance to free-market liberalism, and the acceptance and institutionalization of multiple forms of art making, the promise of an avant-garde voice seems lost. Or is it?

We find amid the ashes of yesterday’s projective and moral declarations not so much the need to carry on business as usual, but rather to re-evaluate what exactly it is that we long for. Yesterday’s avant-gardes – their collectivities – promised self-improvement and moral betterment through group action. The promise became a dogma with which the academy bludgeoned itself. The longing for avant-garde action seems but another nihilism: a will to power by which we imprison ourselves in intellectual inertia. Johanna Drucker tells us, “Uncoupling fine art from the necessity of doing good, we must imagine a role for artistic activity that isn’t by definition a moral virtue.”¹ To uncouple art from morality is not to uncouple it from critique, for morals are but one strain of theory among many. Thinking – communing, communicating and connecting – through the objects that we collect provides an alternative materialist strategy, a way around the aporia brought on by the inevitable question “Whither the avant-garde?”

Binaries like capitalism/communism or mainstream/avant-garde no longer apply to a world that is decidedly more pluralistic than ever before. Rather than falling into a debate about the merits of market vs. anti-market based strategies of art making, it is more productive to deconstruct these binaries and look for one side of a dyad to infect the other. As a result we can ask “Where is the intellectual account of that object? Why did you choose that object over another? And, what does it do? Does it rape the environment in its facture? Does it bring you pleasure? Does it – the object – make life better for you and many others? Do you care, and should I care? What does that object teach us about the world and ourselves?” Questions are productive of more questions and ideas but seeking and imposing moral justification together make a red herring, a distraction that gives us, the art world, little in return.

The collective, collaborative and curatorial practices used by the artists in this exhibition move away from moralizing and instead set up situations that provoke questions and provide new perspectives on seemingly age old problems such as race and class.

Collecting and collectivity: In the past, they were two words opposed in their rhetoric of market celebration and resistance, bad-faith complicity or good-faith agency. Might we find our current condition proffering cooperation between the two words, the act of collecting being a means of collectivity, objects as meaningful social adhesive? There might even be political instantiation in objects – in our analysis and love of them and in objects *qu* objects.

We have gathered a group of artists that navigate many of the questions outlined above. Some interrogate the art object as a fetishized commodity that gathers meaning through a process bordering on alchemy. Others use collaboration to more political

ends, working within the historical connection between collectivism and radicalism.

Team SHaG, a New York-based artist collective that includes Amy Sillman, David Humphrey and Elliot Green (all artists that also have their own individual studio practices and careers) draws on the modernist tradition of exquisite corpse. They make paintings by passing them from one studio to the next, building on a shared but varied vocabulary of pop surrealism and painterly figuration. While the subject matter is not explicitly political, the gesture of painters in today's hyped up art market obscuring the absolute authorship of the individual through collaborative practice is subversive in and of itself.

Danica Phelps and Daniel Lefcourt more directly unpack the ways that art objects perform as fetishized commodities. For example, in her piece *Artist, Collector, Curator, Spy*, Phelps went to galleries posing as a collector and covertly took pictures of art works that she wanted to buy. She then copied them, drawing each as accurately as possible, and curated exhibitions of these drawings. In addition, Phelps tried to use these drawings as currency to buy the original artworks from which they were made, adding those she acquired to thematic exhibitions that included "originals" and drawn and photographic copies

Daniel Lefcourt was commissioned to make *Added Value*, an editioned artwork that a collector sent out as holiday gifts. Lefcourt combined sculpture, video and text to question how value is instilled in a piece of art, linking alchemy to economy as models for the exchange of fetishized meaning. In the video component of the piece, a hand reaches out and injects electricity into a series of objects and images, as if both qualitative and economic value were added with a current of energy.

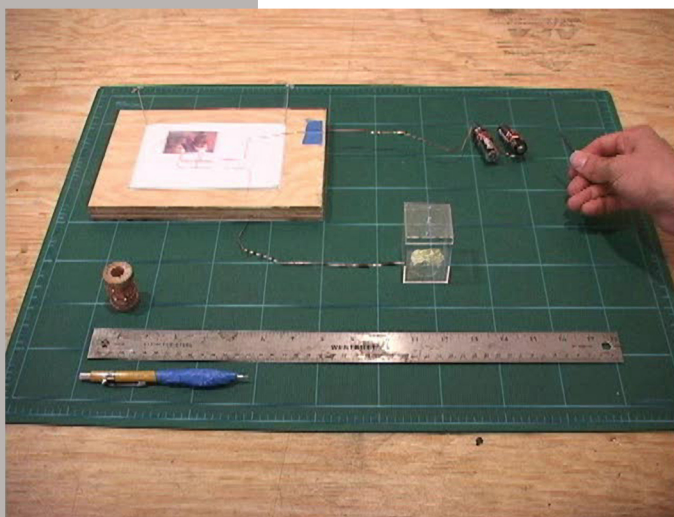
By working in editions, both Phelps and Lefcourt self-consciously elide our assumptions about the auratic original. They construct a critique of market-based constructions of value for artworks through a subversion of the market while at the same time acknowledging the market and using it as a territory for critique to occur. For Phelps this involves a self-conscious use of the exchange value of artworks, while Lefcourt makes fun of the labor "power" necessary for the production of any art object.

Quin Quag, a video by Michael Smith and Joshua White, tells the story of a fictional artist colony in upstate New York. Like Lefcourt, Smith and White use satire to challenge our assumptions about art production. Their view of the now quaint utopian attitudes of 1960s radicalism lays bare the somewhat diminished potential for collectivism to galvanize a revolution of social structure. At one point in the video, we learn that Quin Quag has developed a growing industry producing artist-designed tiles, wooden birds that represent the mascot of the colony, and a signature rocking chair. Are these promotional items or artworks? They seem to acquire meaning through their association with the colony, appealing to our charitable impulses to buy these objects so that the colony can survive.

Creating a collectible collective, Basekamp and David



Danica Phelps
Artist, Collector, Curator, Spy
2002
installation view



Daniel Lefcourt
Added Value
2006
Archival inkjet on plywood, plastic bags, screw, imitation gold leaf, copper wire, inkjet print, and dvd





Basekamp
'Plausible Artworlds Week 1:
Art Histories & Collectivity'
ICA Philadelphia
2007



Julie Ault and Martin Beck
Information
Storefront for Art and Architecture
2006

Otabenga Jones and Associates
(Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus,
Kenya Evans, and Robert A. Pruitt)
lapel buttons from the Menil
Collection's archives displayed
in the exhibition *Lessons from Below*
2007

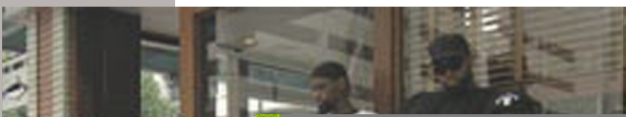
Dempewolf have created a group sense deprivation chamber that resembles an art crate. Basekamp is an artist-group and non-commercial space, which has researched and co-developed interdisciplinary, self-organized art projects with other individuals and groups for the past decade.

Julie Ault and Martin Beck's project for this exhibition is in some ways the most explicitly political. Ault and Beck's *Information* graphs multiple ways of interpreting the U.S. poverty line in relation to proportional income changes in the U.S. in recent decades. This raises questions about the way that poverty is represented in political discourse, revealing the fallacy of claims of scientific objectivity through the collection and organization of facts.

Otabenga Jones & Associates is named after Ota Benga, the African pygmy brought to the United States in 1904 and later exhibited in the Bronx Zoo. Its members include the fictional head of the collective Otabenga Jones as well as Dawolu Jabari Anderson, Jamal Cyrus, Kenya Evans, and Robert A. Pruitt. Their work draws on the history of display, historical civil-rights and black-power images of the 1960s, socially conscious hip-hop of the 1980s, and contemporary black culture — images and objects and texts juxtaposed and forced into dialogues "to mess wit whitey."² Otabenga Jones also uses paraphernalia from the civil rights era combined with ephemera linked to African-American popular culture. In a recent project at the Menil Collection in Houston, they displayed this material in conjunction with historical African artifacts, thereby combining art, activism and popular culture within the construct of the museum. Collecting for Otabenga Jones becomes an expression of collectivity in all of its historical associations with radical politics.

All of these artists cross over the fixed roles of artist, curator and collector. They create new possibilities of meaning by virtue of their collaboration. For in both collecting and collectivity, it is the gathering of many separate parts into a new context that allows for new interpretations that could never exist were each object or each individual to exist in isolation. When people are gathered together, each individual is redefined in the context of the other. When objects come together, be they African sculpture and an image of Chuck D or the socio-economic data of wage disparity, we see that meaning functions through what Jacques Derrida called *différance*³ where the meaning of one object can be searched out by seeing how it is different from something else. But this search for meaning through *différance*, rather than giving us a finite conclusion, begins a chain of differed meaning, prompting an act of re-reading. This exhibition is the act of re-reading collectivity through collecting and vice versa. The grouping of these collaboratives and their constituent members, together with the objects and allusions of

their work allows us to navigate their difference and find the meaning that lives in the spaces between.



-Noah Simblist and Charissa Terranova

¹Drucker, Johanna, "Art Theory Now: From Aesthetics to Aesthesis," unpublished manuscript.

²Otabenga Jones and Associates' three-point mission statement, provided in the exhibition brochure:

"1.) TO TEACH THE TRUTH TO THE YOUNG BLACK YOUTH 2.) TO EXTEND THE PARAMETERS OF THE TRANSATLANTIC AFRO-DIASPORIC AESTHETIC 3.) TO MESS WIT' WHITEY." ; 3.) is a quote from Sam Greenlee's "The Spook Who Sat by the Door."

³Jacques Derrida, "Différance." Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1982).

Published in conjunction with the exhibition Collecting and Collectivity organized for Conduit Gallery by co-curators Noah Simblist, Assistant Professor of Art at SMU and Charissa Terranova, Assistant Professor of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Texas, Dallas and director of the Central Track residency program.

**Collecting and Collectivity
February 16-March 22, 2008**

**Julie Ault and Martin Beck
Basekamp and David Dempewolf
Daniel Lefcourt
Ottabenga Jones and Associates.
Danica Phelps
Team SHaG (Amy Sillman, David Humphrey and Elliot Green),
Michael Smith and Joshua White**

**Conduit Gallery
1626 C Hi Line Dr.
Dallas, TX 75207
<http://www.conduitgallery.com>**

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This exhibition is part of a series of events connected to the themes of collecting and collectivity including a symposium that was held at SMU on October 13, 2007; a panel at the College Art Association Conference in February, 2008; a graduate seminar at SMU in the fall of 2007; and a series of lectures held at SMU throughout 2007-2008 academic year. For more information on these events including biographies of the artists and information on related events visit <http://www.smu.edu/meadows/collecting/index.html>.

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Otabenga Jones & Associates
Self Portrait as N.W.A.
2006
with members (l-r): Jamal Cyrus,
Robert A. Pruitt, Kenya Evans,
Dawolu Jabari Anderson, and
Otabenga Jones
Photograph by Leslie Hewitt

Michael Smith and Joshua White
Quin Quag
2001
video still

