

Groups are like clumps of dirt

Excitement is generated through collective effort.
-bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

Perhaps the difference between sharing your work with just one person and having it received by a group is obvious and perhaps it is not

In any case, it occurs to me that one of the conditions of making art is that eventually gradually you will share your work with others

So, for the simple reason that making art makes necessary holding the attention of others – the problems and the pleasures of the group seem vital to any formal practice

If we can consider for the moment, that many of the problems of making art are bound up with the problems and pleasures of the group then a reflection on the nature of groups, relative to art-making is grounds for conversation

Perhaps if we were writers the condition of the group as context would be even more obvious closed books lie dormant

ready to be picked up and opened
words wait to be read and circulated by others

Books are language
a poet reads to a group
and perhaps book groups are formed

Language is not inherently a form of communication
but painting is certainly more solitary and taciturn

However, painters also show their work to groups
we gather as groups at openings
and put together group shows
to show that our work is in conversation with others

one of the problems with groups however
is that they are not always obvious
a book group is more obvious
but perhaps a crowd at a gallery is less so
what constitutes a group is unclear
not all groups are the same
some will be more sophisticated than others
some might be made up of strangers
some of people you resent
and others of people that you come to know and respect

One of the basic assumptions that I am making or trying out here
is that we make art not just for ourselves
or conversely
for absolutely everyone
but rather
that more or less
we make art
relative to the groups
we are a part of

specifically, groups of people with whom
we can imagine (and cannot imagine)
and that sharing our work
the fact of our emergence

Recognition

as “artists”
is tied irrevocably
to groups

Again

my basic assumption is that we make art for a specific group
which might or might not recognize us
or might or might not recognize even part of us
but that a relationship to the group is foundational to art making

The recognition of a group as audience
can inspire an artist to forsake one group for another
the artworld for something pedestrian
public art is defined by the group it addresses: the public

In the context of an art school
the conditions of being an artist
are replicated by structures like the group critique
and of course the institutions that support and organize us
schools, museums, galleries, residencies, etc
are also vital to what it is to be an artist in the first place

The group critique
both in and out of art school
is an important tool
because how and when we form a sense
of ourselves as artists in the world
the fact of our emergence
recognition

as selves
or as artists
is tied to the group

art is only meaningful to the extent that it functions beyond the
intention of the individual artist

Being part of a cohort and finding meaningful dialogue amongst
colleagues and friends is essential to art-making

It is worth pointing out that *instruction* is absent from critique,
because instruction is a mechanism of something which is
standardized or proven in some way but in critique and from friends
we learn all kinds of things which are not standardized. We make it
up as we go along.

Hopefully, the emergence of a group in art school only makes our
relationships with other family and friend groups more apparent
and of greater consequence

In any case, I want to talk to you about groups
in order to question our viability as individuated artists
and also to direct our attention to our roles
as members of the group of which we are a part

More commonly, attention is placed on the unique role of an
individual artist
but for the sake of this writing I want to discuss the role of the
group
as both a subject in its own right and as a condition of our becoming

An art object has the ability to transform an environment, to
condition the space phenomenologically and affectively – in other
words art can change the mood of space, it can bring up different
thoughts and feelings

conversely, a group or an environment can condition the way we respond to an object. In other words we can make space for something “disagreeable” or learn to “disagree” with something relative to the responses of our peers.

we respond both to the conditions established by the object and the condition established by the group

An individual’s work reveals something about both the artist and importantly, also something about the group

during critique in art school
members of the audience respond one-by-one
saying what comes into their mind
perhaps they make observations
or perhaps they make judgments and evaluations

As it engages with the work
the group reveals something about the art
and it reveals something about itself

A critique
is a period of time in which
critics and students
share in a conversation
free-associating and improvising
saying what comes into their minds

Group experiences are difficult to define
because they are made up of a large constellation of parts by
different people with different points of view and backgrounds

After a critique perhaps more conversation follows

hopefully, the collectivity of the group has caused an excitement
around the art and inspired further investigation of both the art and
the group

we wonder both about the art
and the nature of the group that has responded to the art

The group experience is not only hard to define
it is unpredictable and fallible

in our justice system a group of our peers
might be made to decide if we are innocent or guilty
perhaps groups act as authorities
it is also in groups that we organize against authority
and in groups that we protest

the group can be frustrating
and the group can be pointless
it can be powerful and it can be reckless

But if one of the conditions of being an artist
is to share your work with the group
then what is stake for an artist
is bound up with the conditions of the group
frustrating or not

And perhaps it is for this reason that art and groups are bound up
with each other
and because excitement is generated by collective effort
that art touches us across time and space
beyond the life of an individual

The group has a mind of its own
The group has a way of working
The group is more than the sum of its parts
The group is motivated by and for the group

The group is bound up socially

and maybe....

the art has a mind of its own

the art has a way of working

the art is more than the sum of its parts

the art is motivated by the group

the art is bound up socially

The group interprets the work of art

beyond the intentions of the artist

The group reveals something about the art

and something about the group

it offers up some

shapeshifting impression

which is ultimately relational, cyclical

and without resolution

The intentions of the work of an artist are important

but the group is not empty

and institutions are not neutral

they have their own shape

they are full of their own momentum

Because the group can go round and round

the group can be very frustrating

if you are looking for straightforward answers

perhaps the group is a frivolous thing but perhaps this is the point

that the group is unpredictable

that the group is difference

that the group is diverse

that the group is hard to define

And perhaps people come to experience different forms of art and writing
for the sake of that collective excitement

In this way it makes sense that so many people of great reputation come to art schools to talk to you about your art
and I think this is because they are committed to the group of which we are all a part

The thing about groups
that I find so wonderful
is that they are round
not perfectly round
but rather lopsided and friable
they are awkward and beautiful
they are full of potential and they can be awful
perhaps like a
like a clump of dirt
that you might pick up
and form in your hand
perhaps the soil is rich
and perhaps it is just dust
either way it something to work with

The Problem(s) of the Group

I cannot say exactly when the *problems* of the group first became apparent to me. When I say it became a problem I mean that the problem of groups as a condition of being an artist began to emerge as something specific and differentiated from individuated art-making. For example, when I make work do I express only "I" or do I also belong to or answer to a "we?"

Groups in one sense are exceedingly common and in another they are not. Perhaps it is common to be part of a group but to talk about the group, rather than the individuals within it, is not. In the context of art school we meet in groups for classes and critiques and even when we are not officially organized in groups our classmates and friends constitute a cohort. So what I mean by “the problem of the group” or “the pleasure of the group” is both a totally ordinary part of being an artist and a complicated problem that is difficult to address.

As I began to think about groups I thought about what a group is and what is not. In this writing I choose to define a group as something less than an organization and more than an undefined cluster. I realized that the kind of groups that interested me the most had both an intentional glue and also lacked strict formalized hierarchies.

One of the more entertaining parts of writing this talk was asking friends about their relationships to groups, the topic consistently sparking curiosity and introspection. Two friends of mine who have been involved in Alcoholics Anonymous for a long time were happy to express gratitude for the wisdom they had gained from years of meetings. They both made comments such as, “I can go anywhere, to any small small town and feel that I am part of an intimate group and that gives me a great sense of belonging.”

The other part of my research focused on a book called *Experiences in Groups* by the British psychoanalyst W.R. Bion who organized therapeutic groups in the 1940s and 1950s, influencing many group organizations including Alcoholics Anonymous.

Groups formed in art schools seem to have something common with the kind of “therapeutic groups” Bion writes about. While groups of artists and therapeutic groups are different, all groups have

something in common; groups sustain and structure cultural values and behaviors. Groups have a great potential for support and an equal potential for harm. Through a comparison with therapeutic groups I hope to open up the potential for positive support.

Women and Anger

In 1965, the painter Louise Fishman arrived in New York City ready to join the already established group known as Ab-Ex. In her essay about Fishman, Aruna D'souza quotes her as saying, "I felt that Abstract Expressionist work was an appropriate language for me as a queer. It was a hidden language, on the radical fringe, a language appropriate to being separate." D'souza writes that Fishman "laughs now at her youthful folly: it didn't take her long to discover that being part of the New York Ab Ex world would only be possible if she were a man or willing to sleep with one."

However, by 1969 Fishman had found a group of artists and thinkers who helped her to understand her work through her politics: "during the summer of 1969, she met weekly with Patsy Norvell, Tricia Brown, and Carole Gooden, and come the fall of that year, she began meeting with Norvell and a group of Norvell's artist friends, who lived in and around SoHo."

Here is Fishman in her own words speaking about her relationship to the group:

"My women artists group lasted through the summer, and was followed in the fall of that year by another women artists group I founded along with Patsy Norvell. Members were Jenny Snider, Sarah Draney, Harmony Hammond, Elizabeth Weatherford, Patsy Norvell and myself. We met weekly for four years, looking at each other's work and talking about what it meant to be a woman artist. In 1973 we showed our

art together at the newly founded Nancy Hoffman Gallery in Soho.

In 1973, Marcia Tucker selected me to be included in the Whitney Biennial. I was thrilled to be included, but suffered severely because of the difficulty of being singled out, separating me from my mother and my aunt (both painters) and the other members of my painters' group who were not included. That experience, as important as it was for my career, was also a further radicalization. The Angry Women Paintings were a result of that experience."

Fishman says that the group helped her "get all of the male stuff out of my paintings," finding a way to use the language of abstraction and expression to produce friction and heat within a group that would recognize her gestures as meaningful. Without our own groups it is difficult to grapple with the problems of the group — it is difficult to feel our own heat.

A group provides a certain scale: not too big and not too small, big enough to keep you on your toes and small enough that your gesture or voice can hit a wall or an edge and hear its echo. Fishman's work expresses not her own anger but that of her group. Her anger echoes through the group or perhaps it would be better to say the anger of the group echoes through her. For Fishman her anger is not personal anger; for Fishman the group includes Marilyn Monroe and for Fishman, even she is angry.

EXPERIENCE IN GROUPS

In *Experiences in Groups* Bion writes, "In the treatment of the individual, neurosis is displayed as a problem of the individual. In

the treatment of a group it must be displayed as a problem of the group.”

And perhaps this bears repeating: “In the treatment of the individual, neurosis is displayed as a problem of the individual. In the treatment of a group it must be displayed as a problem of the group.”

Bion was part of a large wave of psychoanalytic thought in Europe. After serving in World War I, he studied History at Oxford and then Medicine in London, learning about what was then a “strange new field of medicine” called “psychoanalysis.” He was influenced by his friend Wilfred Trotter, a brain surgeon who had published a then-famous book based on the horrors of World War I called *Instincts of the The Herd in Peace and War*.

Bion and many other psychotherapists came together to form an “invisible college,” working together to advance ideas on therapeutic communities and group therapy. Out of this group was formed the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, an interdisciplinary group interested in the problems of organizational and societal change. The group established something called The Family Discussion Bureau, which housed a unit for adolescents and the School of Family Psychiatry and Community Mental Health. The famous clinic was not only a social institution, it was a center for artists and intellectuals; among others the novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett underwent psychoanalysis with Bion from 1934-1935. Much of Bion’s work builds on the research of Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst who worked with children and developed a branch of psychoanalysis called Object Relations Theory. From 1946 to 1952 Bion himself underwent psychoanalysis with Klein.

To understand Bion’s work with group therapy I find it meaningful to know something about his own trauma. Bion had been given a

military award called the Distinguished Service Order, which details the actions for which he received the award: in brief, *his tank was hit directly and put out of action; once the tank was disabled he hurried into a trench to once again open fire on the enemy; moving out into the open to give directions to arriving tanks, he captured an enemy machine gun, and took over the command of a company of infantry whose commander had been killed.*

In the first chapter of Bion's writing he recounts a span of several months working as the resident therapist in the military training wing with his fellow veterans of World War I, concluding that:

“Psychology and psychopathology have focused attention on the individual often to the exclusion of the social field of which they are a part. There is a useful future in the study of the interplay of individual and social psychology, viewed as equally important interacting elements.”

Bion felt that the treatment of individuals suffering from the traumas of war lacked treatment of the groups of which they were a part.

He writes “Neurosis needs to be displayed as a danger to the group; and its *display* must somehow be made the common aim of the group.” And he sets out to answer the following question: “How is the group to be persuaded to tackle neurotic disability as a communal problem?”

In the case of therapeutic groups today such as A.A. the communal problem seems straightforward. The problem of alcohol and addiction is made the common problem of the group and the members of the group support each other through meetings and sponsorship. The first step in the twelve traditions states, “Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence

our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.”

So while the problem itself is obvious to everyone, convincing the group that the problem should be tackled as a communal problem is not.

For the group that included Jenny Snider, Sarah Draney, Harmony Hammond, Elizabeth Weatherford, Patsy Norvell and Louise Fishman, the common aim of the group was to support each other as women artists, “to get all the male stuff out,” as Fishman put it. Again, the problem of being a woman artist is obvious but the problem of tackling it as a communal problem was not.

Bion’s attempt to persuade groups “to tackle neurotic disability as a communal problem,” in the military training wing reads like a tragic comedy – a tragedy in the sense that Bion seems destined for failure, and a comedy in the sense that he seems intent on it.

Bion gathers a group together. I imagine 7 or 8 people sitting in a circle, but he gives them absolutely no instructions. He writes:

“It becomes clear to me that I am, in some sense, the focus of attention in the group. Furthermore, I am aware of a feeling uneasily that I am expected to do something. At this point I confide my anxieties to the group. I content myself with pointing out that clearly the group cannot be getting from me what they feel they are entitled to expect. I wonder what these expectations are, and what has aroused them.”

For pages and pages his accounts continue like this:

“Now the point that emerges in all the groups from which I have been drawing examples is that the most prominent feeling which the group experiences is a feeling of frustration—a very unpleasant surprise to the individual who comes seeking gratification.”

Bion is quick to point out that we, the readers of his narrative, have the advantage of sitting alone comfortably removed from the very real emotions and frustrations of his group.

This reminds me of something Fred Moten and Stephano Harney write about “the call to order” in their book *The Undercommons*:

“What if I just say, ‘well, we’re here. Here we are now.’ Instead of announcing that class has begun, just acknowledge that class began. It seems like a simple gesture and not very important. But I think it’s really important. And I also think it’s important to acknowledge how hard it is not to do that. In other words, how hard it would be, on a consistent basis, not to issue the call to order – but also to recognize how important it would be, how interesting it might be, what new kinds of things might emerge out of the capacity to refuse to issue the call to order. In recognizing all kinds of other shit that could happen, see what happens when you refuse at that moment to become an instrument of governance, seeing how a certain kind of discomfort will occur. I’ve had students who will issue the call, as if there’s a power vacuum and somebody has to step in.”

In *Experience in Groups*, Bion writes:

“It will be remembered that I have described that after groups have assembled, but before they have become used to the technique, there is a pause while everybody ‘waits for the group to begin’. It is quite common for someone to ask when the group begins. Now from one point of view the perfectly simple answer is that the group begins at 10:30, or whatever the hour is that has been appointed for the meeting, but a shift of point of view, admittedly of some magnitude, on my part, means that I am viewing group phenomena that do not

“begin”; the matters with which I am concerned continue and evolve, but they do not “begin.”

I owe my initial interest in Bion to Andrea Fraser who gave a workshop on “groups” to a group of college art students. Although I was not present at Fraser’s workshop I found the topic interesting. Apparently, she had involved the group of students in an experiment in which she asked them to speak as if the group were speaking, anthropomorphically, as the group. They were to switch out the first person pronoun “I” for the words “the group.”

I don’t know what the group was asked to talk about, only that perhaps the individuals of the group were asked to speak as “the group” and not as individuals.

For example, if I wanted to say, “I am giving a lecture at the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School,”

instead I would say: “*The group* is giving a lecture at the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School.”

But why would I (or “the group”) want to make such a statement?

According to the person I spoke with, Fraser’s workshop was not well-received, so when I began to read Bion’s *Experiences in Groups* I was amused to find out that neither was he. He writes, “We must recognize now that a crisis has been reached, in that members may well have discovered that membership of a group in which I am a member happens to be an experience that they do not wish to have.”

Persistently, Bion eschews personal responsibility for the group’s discomfort, attributing it instead to their false expectations around how a group psychiatrist is meant to conduct himself:

“At the appointed time members of the group begin to arrive; individuals engage each other in conversation for a short time, and then, when a certain number has collected, a silence falls on the group. After a while desultory conversation breaks out again, and then another silence falls.

It becomes clear to me that I am, in some sense, the focus of attention in the group. Furthermore, I am aware of a feeling uneasily that I am expected to do something. At this point I confide my anxieties to the group, remarking that however mistaken my attitude might be, I feel just this.

I soon find that my confidence is not very well received. Indeed, there is some indignation that I should express such feelings without seeming to appreciate that the group is entitled to expect something from me. I do not dispute this, but content myself with pointing out that clearly the group cannot be getting from me what they feel they are entitled to expect. I wonder what these expectations are, and what has aroused them.”

I’m relieved to have encountered Bion’s groups as a reader in the comfort of my own space, but I also wonder how I myself might have responded in their situation. What would I have done? What would I have said? And in asking myself these questions, much is revealed about my own expectations.

Rather than submit to their need for instruction, Bion persists in trying to persuade them out of their expectations:

“The insistence of the group that no one but myself has any right to command attention is matched by a firm sense of disappointment in what I do: an unshakeable belief that they are justified in thinking I am qualified by training and

experience to lead the group is matched by an almost equally unshakeable indifference to everything I say.”

I wonder, what are the expectations of group critiques in art school? What are our expectations as teachers and what are our expectations as students?

“We are giving a lecture at the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Art.” In a sense this is not as ridiculous as it sounds. A lecture is made up of two parts, the one who speaks and the ones who listen — the two parts produce each other. I speak because you listen and you listen because I speak. We are dependent on one another. We are a group. And ideally later on someone else would write a lecture and I would listen.

This might not happen in the next month or year but at some point it is in fact very likely that someone here will write a lecture and that I will come to that lecture and I will listen.

Tensions

Tension is defined as:

Noun,

1. The state of being stretched tight
2. Mental or emotional strain.

Verb,

To apply a force to (something) which tends to stretch it.

Bion again:

“In the groups in which I am psychiatrist I am the most obvious person, by virtue of my position, in whom to vest a right to establish rules of procedure. I take advantage of this

position to establish no rules of procedure and to put forward no agenda.”

What Bion, Fraser and Moten and Harney are getting at is a shift in perspective or a shift in power or a shift in responsibility, wherein members of the group might become a cohort of critical thinkers, aware of themselves both as individuals and as members of groups concerned with collective excitement and wellbeing.

In his classic book about critical thinking, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière writes about a group of Flemish students who learn French without receiving any instruction from their teacher, by way of translating a text as a group. Their teacher, Joseph Jacotot, who has been teaching for decades, suddenly has to rethink his relationship to *explication*. Rancière writes:

“The experiment seemed to him sufficient to shed light: one can teach what one doesn’t know if the student is emancipated, that is to say, if she is obliged to use her own intelligence...Whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn’t have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. They will learn what they want, nothing maybe.”

When placed in a group with others, individual subjects will gradually discover that they have divergent experiences and differing expectations. For Jacotot’s students these differences seem to work like puzzle pieces — together they could translate bits of what they could understand from the Flemish. Their differences and their ability to cooperate were exactly what enabled them.

But what if the group is never allowed to integrate divergent experiences?

Or what if individuals keep these discoveries to themselves?

The problem of groups emerges as the problem

of integrating disparate parts into a diverse social body

What does one learn exactly by being in a group? Nothing maybe, or maybe everything. For Fishman and company it was “how to get all the male stuff out.” Are there groups of artists working today with common aims? What are our aims as a group and are we able to tackle them as communal problems?

What does one learn exactly from a critique? Nothing maybe and maybe everything. We learn what it is like to have a common aim and, unfortunately, more often than not, what disagreement is like. But if problems of the group are never allowed to emerge, can the work of the group, our collective aims, ever emerge?

The word tension is inside of the word attention

Tension

a point of tension

intensity and

tense

all seem to reveal a link between looking

or that which we pay attention to

tensions seem to produce *attention*

And so perhaps integrating the tensions of the group approximates that which makes art valuable to society.

The group will always express ambivalence. Differing individual feelings, ideas, and convictions will emerge and produce tensions; the group can either “split” or attempt to integrate these tensions. And by accepting the tension inherent to the group we might more easily learn to entertain our own ambivalences.

The challenge posed by Fraser is that of *de-sublimating*: if one speaks for the group or anthropomorphically as “the group,” one realizes just how difficult it is to put space around the thoughts and

feelings of others. And I think this is especially true when certain members of the group have more power over others and when we are in competition with each other.

The point here is not about conflict per se but rather about staying with the natural tensions and frictions inherent to difference in order to reveal underlying truths and produce transformations.

Bion writes about what he calls “giving answers” and I think that “giving answers” is what we call *critique*.

In a group there is an energy, a mood, tensions, revelations and sometimes conflict. When we learn to critique we learn to accept the tension of the group as something productive, as something to pay attention to. We learn to be aware, as Bion does, of friction as tension, as energy, as spark.

Institutional Critique

In her essay “Why Does Fred Sandback’s Work Make Me Cry”, Andrea Fraser investigates a very specific instance of weeping in front of Fred Sandback’s work one day at Dia Beacon in upstate New York. To better understand the experience of having been moved to tears in front of this specific work of art inside this specific institution, she traverses the psychoanalytic writing on tears. As Hanna Segal and others point out, an experience of loss is what most commonly leads to crying.

So the question arises, what is lost?

Sandback’s work produces the illusion of microscopically thin, two-dimensional planes. Sometimes it is hard to see or imagine “the group” that once supported the formation of a living thing. Museums, like many institutions, like zoos, like prisons, objectify

living things — and those objects are made separate from the groups and ecologies of which they were once a part. Imagine all those ancient and not so ancient artifacts that are now housed in museums, no longer in the possession of the people who produced them — there is so much grief in this.

Sandback's strings held in tension produce delicate, monumental voids, creating an environment that locates this institutional grief. The museum "neutralizes" the work of art by preserving it long after the group is gone. Institutional critique is the work of showing what is lost — that neutrality is not passive, that it is an act of suppressing difference.

If we are to survive as groups who can tackle communal problems, can we do so inside the neutralizing effect of the institution? Inside the numbing effects of capitalism? While at the same time acknowledging our dependence on the support of markets and institutions?

Fraser writes:

"Just as art cannot exist outside of the field of art, I cannot exist outside of the field of art, at least not as what I am, which is an artist. And this is also the limit of institutional critique. I can attack those internal objects. I can rip at the walls of my institutional body. But I can't tear it down completely, and I can't leave it, because I would then not only cease to have an effect within the field; I would also cease to exist."

Perhaps for Fraser, Sandback's delicate strings confront her with her own fragile attachments. This is a delicate position (a string held in tension).

She continues, “This is my greatest difficulty. I believe that art cannot exist outside of the field of art. However, at the same time that I maintain this view, I know that, somehow, I also believe that art cannot exist within the field of art.”

If our capacity for aesthetic experience is socially determined, which I agree with Fraser that it is, we should seek out intimate, socially-experimental, high-stakes art groups which can sustain and hold the conditions for institutional critique. If we are to survive institutions we will have to do so together.

I called this essay “groups are like clumps of dirt” because my wife’s niece was telling us a story about some kids picking up soft earth and throwing balls of mud around. I can imagine the horror of the parents relative to the excitement of the kids as they discovered the feeling of cool dirt in their little hands — such fun, such trouble. Some groups will be supportive and others not; groups are unpredictable in this way. A group is full of potential and it is fragile. Like a clump of dirt, a group might be as solid as stone or entirely friable. When a ball of dirt falls apart it just goes back into the earth again so the potential is always there. A certain energy or excitement is needed to hold it together.