



FIRST AMONG EQUALS PHILADELPHIA

An art teacher of mine once suggested that "organized clutter" was the standard for a reasonably clean studio. The recent exhibition of collaborative art, *First Among Equals* [March 14–August 12, 2012], at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia looks a lot like studio clutter, not all of it organized. The exhibition seeks to shed light—through a sampling of Los Angeles- and Philadelphia-based collective efforts—on who culls the clutter and how his or her vision comes through.

It is common for artists to keep reminders on hand of others' work that inspires them—sometimes photographic reproductions, sometimes actual pieces. Alex Da Corte's *Scene Take Six*, 2012, includes a dozen objects inspired or lent by artists that influenced Da Corte: bags of colored fiber inspired by Polly Apfelbaum; multiple, identical, poster-size prints with enlarged halftone dots inspired by Karen Kilimnick; and Paul Thek's *Fish Tank*, 1968, on loan—which consists of a large shell on top of a Plexiglas vitrine—set within a series of larger vitrines. Da Corte's own contributions, which include a glass-bead encrusted snake and a few buckets of brown moldering soda add to this installation. If the selection of these objects seems random, their ordering is strict. Da Corte has positioned the works by color on two sides of a central wall—pink on the left, gray on the right—and additionally by height with tall items close to the wall and floor-bound ones further away. With permission to use these better known artists' works, Da Corte curates them in a manner that subordinates their identity to his hierarchical vision.

Mateo Tannatt created a signature fabric and invited colleagues to create new work using the fabric rather than selecting from pre-existing pieces. The resulting installation, *Studio Complex/Beardsley Farm/Heaven's Gate*, 2012, consists mainly of textiles draped over a scaffolding of industrial-strength metal poles. Tannatt's chosen artists turned out a number of objects that shared some recurring motifs: a naked belly printed on burlap and on shirts; the face of blond-haired Asian

actress JingJing Dan on the same shirts and in a video; and a yellow dot applied to draped burlap and burlap stretched as canvas. Though the installation lacks the kind of relentless logic that Da Corte has employed, its author's stamp is obviously more evident. The end result is more of a single piece than a collection.

If Tannatt's work shows the effect of an individual on a group, a double entry by Philadelphia's Machete Group and Marginal Utility shows the effect of the collective on an individual. Machete Group's critical theorists demonstrate left-leaning politics via writings and seminars, focusing on subjects including the Occupy movement and theorists such as Herbert Marcuse. Marginal Utility publishes *Machete Zine* and produces regular series of site-specific installations at its Philadelphia gallery space. Both groups have curated mini shows within the larger show, including Marginal Utility's mini-exhibition sequence, which stretches over the run of the exhibition. First in line in Marginal Utility's space was Alexi Kukuljevic's *The I Lesson, Part I*, 2012, a cabinet of curiosities bounded by reconfigurable walls that created a coffin-shaped space. Kukuljevic's objects are varied—a music stand, images of arrays of eggs, plaster casts of jawbones. Many are self-referential: a hat appears next to an image of a man wearing it, along with the pamphlet he authored. An artist-printed version of the treatise *The Bio-Adapter* by Kukuljevic's fictional alter-ego Oswald Wiener seems to complete Kukuljevic's aesthetic of self-puzzlement. Wiener's quixotic text is itself an enigma, purporting to be "the first sketch of a complete solution of all world problems." Although *The I Lesson, Part I* appears deeply introverted, Kukuljevic's choices are also influenced by Machete Group's idealism and radical tenor.

A tendency toward casual interconnectedness is also on display in *First Among Equals*. The Philadelphia-based collective Extra Extra, for example, is the author of an intriguing but technically flawed virtual museum titled *Ditto Suite*, 2012. Extra Extra is also a contributor to a

pamphlet series commissioned by the Philadelphia-based group Bodega. That pamphlet, "Dreams Scarcity," 2012, is on display in the gallery with others, including one by the Slought Foundation, an idiosyncratic exhibition space that also played host to Machete Group's presentation on Herbert Marcuse. Bodega also has a separate, untitled installation in the exhibition that offers viewers a chance to examine a series of posters commissioned from performers. The large sheets announce performances slated to take place during *First Among Equals*' run.

The array of artists and groupings of artists in *First Among Equals* is dizzying, and quite likely a by-product of the Facebook era in which it was conceived. There are one-way relationships, in which a leader selects and organizes other's works, and more fluid ones (e.g. Kukuljevic's Machete Group piece) where give-and-take is apparent. So many of the collaborations exhibit multiple connections that it's difficult to map them out. In this regard *First Among Equals* is a fitting representation of the scarcely organized clutter of twenty-first century life.

—Edward Epstein

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Kathryn Andrews, installation view of *Serial Killer*, 2012, mobile chain-link fence with intermittent performance [courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery and Christian Nagel Gallery]; Mateo Tannatt [with Darren Bader, Tina Braegger, JingJing Dan, Barry Macgregor Johnston, Pauline, Nancy Soto, Federico Spadoni, and Jesse Willenbring], *Studio Complex/Beardsley Farm/Heaven's Gate*, 2012, digitally printed silk, burlap, silkscreen, acrylic paint, HD video, iPod touch, and scaffolding [courtesy of the artist and Marc Foxx Gallery]