ART REVIEW

Charting Degrees of Separation and Connection in the Art World

By Ken Johnson

With groups like Reena Spaulings, the Bernardette Corporation and The Wrong Gallery included in the Whitney Biennial this year, talk of artist collectives, cooperatives and collaborations has been much in the air. The organizers of "When Artists Say We," a messy sociological experiment of a show at Artists Space in SoHo, reason that most, if not all, artists belong to groups — those who produce objects by themselves no less than those who operate in collectives with names that sound like those of rock 'n' roll bands.

So Andrea Geyer, a German artist who lives in New York, and Christian Rattemeyer, the curator of Artists Space, invited 17 individuals and groups to examine their experience of social networks. Some organized small group shows, Emily Jacir, for example, put together an exhibition of politicallyendentious works by her personal acquaintances. But the most testing projects are those that try to chart actual networks of friends and associates.

Mike Balou, founder of the Four Walls alternative project space, filled a wall with small tags bearing the names of scores of artists who have participated in Four Walls events, and he added curvy painted lines to show which ones were involved in which programs. For his "Post/Artist/Flow..." project, Artists Space asked three groups to make a wall installation by Mina Schor, made from publications that have mattered to her. A wall installation by Mina Schor, made from publications that have mattered to her.

"When Artists Say We" is at Artists Space, 38 Greene Street, SoHo, (212) 226-2970, through April 29.

"The Man Without Qualities" in which an army general explains how he tried and failed to chart the major ideas of Central European culture. If you are familiar with the careers of Mr. Gillick and Mr. James, both active in some of the most influential social networks of New York's contemporary art world, you can't help seeing this as an opportunity missed. Mr. Gillick should with Casey Kaplan Gallery, and his friends and collaborators include internationally celebrated artists like Richard Prince and Pierre Hayghe. Mr. James, represented by Elizabeth Dee Gallery, was an administrator of the Whitney Independent Study Program, is a curator of the alternative gallery Orchard and is chairman of the visual arts division of Columbia University's School of the Arts. If Mr. Gillick and Mr. James were to chart their respective social circles, it would be an illuminating case study in the politics and sociology of art.

The question all these artists need to know more about is the relation of their careers as artists to their social connections, or are we just talking about trivial and irrelevant gossip? Would a chart revealing the streams of social and economic influence underlying, say, the Whitney Biennial contribute something valuable to our understanding of contemporary art? Surely, it could at least help to explain to outsiders which is to say, most people who go to a show — why some works of seemingly abundant quality are included in the show.

Perhaps there is a fear of undermining a certain idea of the art world as a meritocracy. If you turn out that the talent that rose to the top was not necessarily the best but only the most favorably connected, art's intellectual and spiritual legitimacy — and its monetary value — might be called into question.

Ultimately, the system may not be as corrupt as some think it is, or as pure as others might imagine. Either way, a little more transparency couldn't hurt.