

ART REVIEW

Charting Degrees of Separation and Connection in the Art World

By KEN JOHNSON

With groups like Reena Spaulings, the Bernadette 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 Rattermeyer, 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 politically tendentious works by her personal acquaintances. But the most telling projects are those that try to chart actual networks of friends and associates.

Mike Ballou, 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 "Poet/Artist/Flow-

"When Artists Say We" is at Artists Space, 38 Greene Street, SoHo, (212) 226-3970, through April 29.

chart," Jeremy Sigler used a black crayon to fill a section of wall with the names of all the people he knows in the art and poetry worlds. These give you a sense of the art world as a kind of Darwinian ecosystem of shifting, overlapping, competing subpopulations.

Several projects are historical. Arianne Gelardin, an artist and former Artists Space intern, used color-coded yarn and fabric to show the various groups involved in Artists

When Artists Say We

Artists Space

Space during its heyday, 1973 to 1980, when it produced important exhibitions like "Pictures" and helped start the careers of many artists, among them Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Jennifer Bartlett. Each of the dozens of people named is associated with an institution or group, among them Hallwalls, Cal Arts Mafia, CoLab, Franklin Furnace and Real Life magazine. The chart prompts reflection on how cliques, gangs and other more or less exclusive collectives affect the course of art history as much as the works of individual artists do.

The dancer Yvonne Rainer presents a letter and a diagram explaining the evolution and influences of modern dance since 1950 that she sent to the dance critic Arlene Croce of *The New Yorker*; Ms. Rainer had accused Ms. Croce of getting it all wrong in a 1980 article about the contemporary dance



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

A wall installation by Mira Schor, made from publications that have mattered to her.

scene. Her point is that accurately tracking social and artistic affiliations and influences is essential to understanding art at any given point.

But one pair of artists, Liam Gillick and Gareth James, deflect and seem to mock the idea of the show. They present a page printed with a story from Robert Musil's novel

"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 shows with Casey Kaplan Gallery, and his friends and collaborators include internationally celebrated artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Pierre Huyghe. Mr. James, represented by Elizabeth Dee Gallery, was an administrator of the Whitney Independent Study Program, is an organizer 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 this invites is, do we need to know more about art's 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 see it — why some works of seemingly doubtful quality are included in the show.

Perhaps there is a fear of undermining faith in the system as a meritocracy. If it turned out that the talent that rose to the top was not necessarily the best but only the most advantageously connected, art's intellectual and spiritual credibility — 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.