

zingmagazine

a curatorial crossing



“Corner Store,” Pulse Miami 2009

Interview: Okay Mountain

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By “Devon Dikeou”

The collaborative group in contemporary art practice is really an old thing all dressed as new, and rechristened—rock star style. In some ways, the medieval guild was the long lived precursor where a group of artisans—let’s say stone workers, grouped together to work on a project—let’s say a cathedral, and the work of the group became apotheosis of a lifelong achievement, if that . . . There was security and anonymity. This practice segued into the school of the Master, when young artists apprenticed for a master often completing his works or filling massive amounts of it, perhaps specializing in drapery or some other eccentricity, and sometimes even moving onto studios of their own. Security and a little less anonymity. As the twentieth century rolled along groups had manifestos and full fledged memberships—Think the Dadaists and the Surrealists, much less the Fluxists or the Situationists. More security more group celebrity. In terms of contemporary art practices in the 80’s and 90’s we would often see collaborative teams of two people—Fischli & Weiss, Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, Doug and Mike Starn, Pruitt & Early, Jane and Louise Wilson . . . or an artist working in tandem with a group like Tim Rollins and KOS. More security less anonymity. And then larger groups started to emerge like The Art Guys, Art Club 2000, The Royal Art Lodge or Bernadette Corporation. Group security group anonymity. The 21st century iteration of group effort exists in many forms and shows up in many venues from the recent shows like the “Ungovernables”, and “Younger Than Jesus” and is almost de rigeur . . . in terms of galleries on the Lower East Side or following the pop-up model, curatorial collaboration is widespread from Reena Spaulings, Lucie Fontaine, and 47 Canal to the ever present Bruce High Quality Foundation. In Austin, Texas, another group has emerged: Okay Mountain. Like other collaboratives Okay Mountain reaches across curatorial and market boundaries creating a new space for their work, practice, audience, and collaboration. A team of ten guys, we caught up with them recently and the interview that follows is the zingmagazine scout shout out.

Where did the name Okay Mountain come from . . . As an editor, I am intrigued with style guides/copy editing, so . . . How did you reconcile “Okay” vs “OK” Mountain . . .

When we dissolved our two smaller spaces (Camp Fig and Fresh Up Club) in 2005 we knew that the new venture would have to have its own identity so we needed a new name. About a half dozen of the guys met up one evening to make a decision, where I think we met for at least three hours, mulling back and forth over different ideas. I think we all liked a name that alluded to a physical place (Forest, Mountain, River etc) and Okay Mountain was a name that no one hated. What also appealed to us was the idea of this huge, mighty form . . . but just an okay version of that. A tinge of self-deprecation, but ultimately a mountain is still a mountain, even if it is sort of dinky. The second runner up was ‘Boosterz’ which was supposed to sound like a sucky sports bar. It was a lively debate, but ultimately the right choice was made.

Truthfully, I don’t think that the “OK” vs “Okay” debate ever even came up. We all envisioned the wording as “Okay” without even discussing it, which is a rarity. It’s not too often that we’re all on the same page about anything without numerous conversations and debates.

Give us a little bit about your historic and artistic etymology . . . You were all students at University of Texas . . . Who did you study with . . . Mel Ziegler . . . Right? He was part of the collaborative team of Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler . . . Are there any collaborative inspirational voices that you learned from be it Ericson and Ziegler or other collaboratives . . .

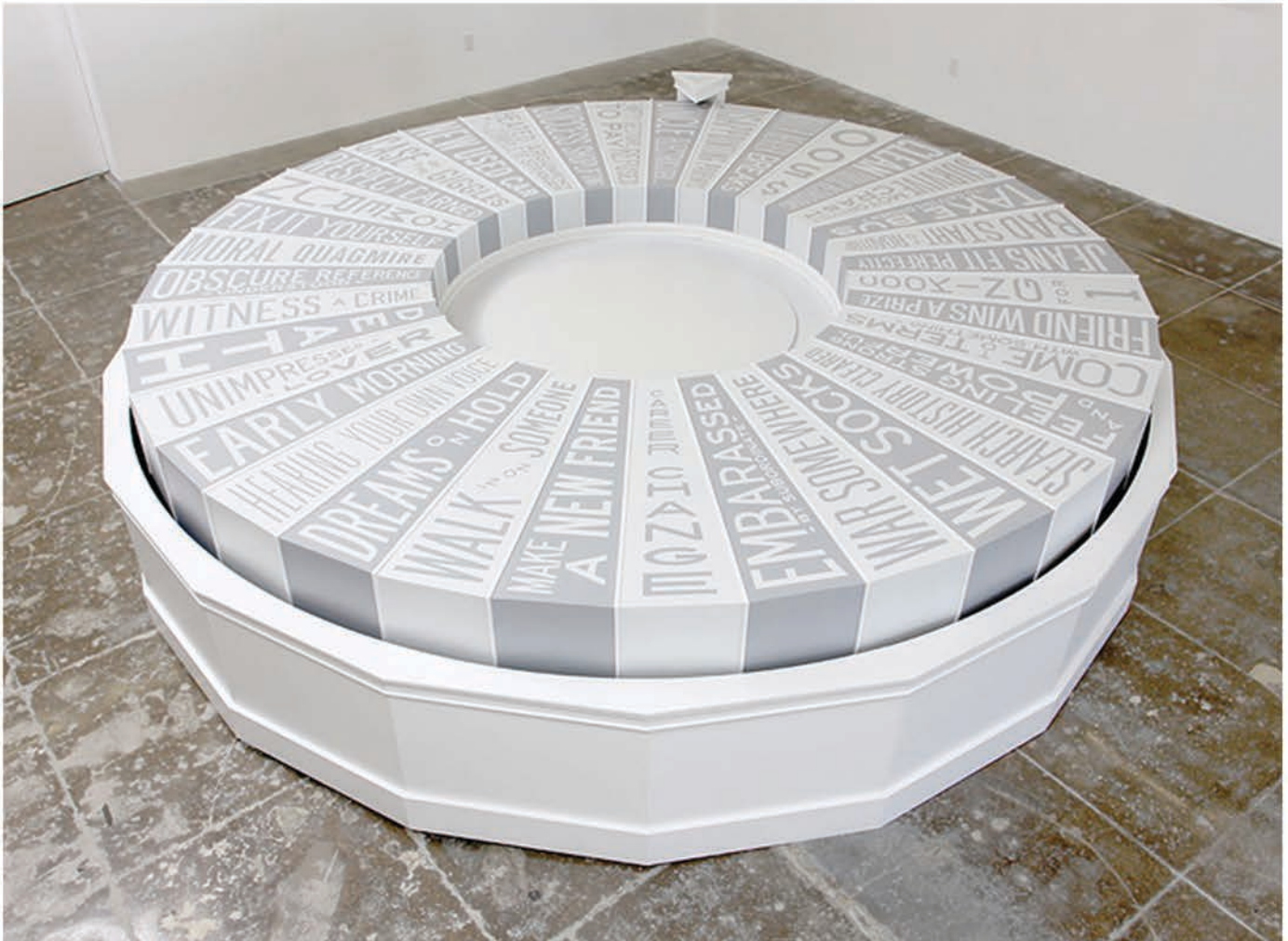
Obviously, there are a lot of us, and so the story of our forming has many threads. It is true that about half of us attended the University of Texas, though not all at the same time. It is also true that several of us were inspired by Mel’s tutelage, but more importantly, Mel rented out his studio to us so that we could form Okay Mountain, and then later sold that building so that we, like his little eaglets had to fly on our own. Once, in lieu of better entertainment, we burned a couch to cinders in our yard, then, in fear of Mel’s judgement, we crudely buried the scorched remains. But Mel figured it out and left us a note of avuncular reproach in which he addressed us as the Okay-Mountain-bad-boys, and signed himself the daddy-type-landlord. I think that is how both parties conceive of our relationship still.

That said, we definitely were not modeling ourselves after Mel and Kate’s collaboration, nor any other collectives. We opened Okay Mountain as a contemporary art gallery in 2006 with no plan of collaborating. We’re still called an alternative space but our plan was to be a totally-legit, mainstream operation that showed the type of art that we liked and was otherwise unseen in the region. We really agonized over getting the drywall and lighting in good shape, and we had a lot of experience by then because Okay Mountain was a hybrid of two separate galleries that various Mountaineers had founded and run in the previous few years and for one reason or another had outgrown.

The unsexy minutiae of gallery operations meant we were together often. We were trying to be egalitarian about everything from curating to lawn-mowing, and during all gatherings we’d pass around a sketchbook for the fun of it. That began our series of 7x7 (inch) collaborative drawings, which we’d sell out of our back room to help cover the rent. They sold well and from those we were asked to do our first show, as a collective, which we had never imagined hitherto. That was about two years after we opened as a gallery and although we can’t even claim the idea of forming as a collective, we quickly grew to enjoy the possibilities and began in earnest to make work together. If there is anything unique about our collective model, it is that we were not drawn together by a shared political or aesthetic ideology. In fact, we generally disagree about all-things-art. We do, however, enjoy spending time together and somehow art is the sphere that brought us together.

This brings to mind the Surrealist game, Exquisite Corpse, which is very much in the spirit of your zingmagazine project soon to appear in issue 23 . . . Please detail the process for your zing project entitled, “Family Tree” . . .

Family Tree is the most recent iteration of a long line of Okay Mountain drawing games. These games started as a way to kill time while working gallery hours and during weekly meetings. We continued the practice for years. Whether that be at bars, in airports, on planes, in a car during a long road trip, or in an hotel rooms, anytime a lot of us are together we played drawing games. For years we played a game called “What Kills What”. Someone makes a drawing and then the next person has to make a drawing that kills/renders moot/cancels out the first, then the drawing is passed and this goes on endlessly. I imagine each and every member’s sketchbook is chock full of past “What Kills Whats”. While traveling for projects, one of our members decided to morph the game into “What Makes What”, essentially mating two things together to make an offspring. After a few runs of the game it was aptly titled, “Family Tree”, as it lays out a genealogy of sorts. When approached to participate in zing 23, we decided to extend to game to create a drawing project exclusively for print. In designing the layout of the project, it was important that the game grew in complexity as the viewer flipped pages, to capitalize on what was so fun about playing the game in the first place—watching objects slowly become absolutely absurd and seeing how your friends riffed on each other’s content. We emailed a few different possible growth patterns and blueprints to one another, voted and then started drawing. One member took the directorial position and orchestrated the entire project, deciding the pairs, making mock-ups, and passing out assignments to members. Six batch assignments were handed out and completed over the course of a month and a half. After all of the content had been generated, the line drawings were compiled into large Photoshop files, which were layed out, colored, cleaned up, and sent to print.



“Big Wheel” 2011

It is also interesting that each of you have your own art practices . . . how do each of you juggle each of your individual careers with the ideas, goals, and practicalities of the group . . .

Balancing our individual careers with the trajectory and obligations of the collective can be as challenging as it is rewarding. There have been times when the collective has shows lined up in pretty quick succession, enough that it is hard to decompress and reactivate our individual practices. Working in a group that is under one banner is not the easiest thing in that regard. Your personal practice flies out the window in service of a common concept or formal undertaking; sometimes your role is as a general at the center of an idea, other times you are left sanding a log outside in 20 degree weather. The flip side of this coin is that everyday you enter the studio you are being challenged, educated, and enriched by your fellow collective members. It’s a complete experience, best of times/worst of times in the most literal sense.

I first saw your work at the Pulse Fair in Miami 2010 . . . you showed a Food Cart, I believe it was called “Benefit Plate” . . . which is funny because Austin seems like it is the center of the Food Truck culture . . . But I feel I first started reading and hearing about your work after “Corner Store” (which was exhibited at Pulse 2009 in Austin’s Arthouse’s booth) . . . when did your work as a collaborative first receive national exposure . . .

As it is with others, our success started locally and spread from there. We were given a show by Jade Walker at the Creative Research Laboratory in Austin (“It’s Going to Be Everything”, January 2008) and that started the process of our group thinking about doing a show that was a combination of our art efforts, which had been very loose, organic, and informal up to that point, and started us down the path of exploring the different ways we could collaborate. From that, we were offered a show later in the year at Paragraph Gallery in Kansas City, which allowed us to use some of our favorite aspects of the CRL show and add a few other elements. It was Sue Graze and Elizabeth Dunbar at Arthouse who gave us a chance to make an international splash at Pulse Miami in 2009, and we were ready. Instead of taking a shotgun approach to filling the gallery space like we had done with the first two collaborative shows, we created an all-encompassing idea in the “Corner Store” and filled it with all of the ideas we could generate within it. That loose, fun structure, combined with the winking subtext of the art fair as a fine art convenience store for the wealthy, was a big hit with everyone attending—we won the Pulse Prize and People’s Choice awards, and all of sudden we had to filter through a ton of offers from gallerists and institutions.

When I visited the studio you all were working on a kind of “Big Wheel”, titled “Ultrasonic VI” that was shown at Mark Moore in LA. Wheels like “Ultrasonic VI” conjure everything from Pat Sajak and Cake Walks, to “The Price Is Right”. How do you see the viewer in terms of participation . . . or for that matter, the viewer in terms of relational aesthetics . . .

Our works do tend to invoke a collective approach to enjoyment, which is related to some of the ideas behind relational aesthetics. But for us participation is not simply an end goal that we work backwards from. Nevertheless, often times participation becomes integral to the execution of our ideas. In other words, our work does not necessarily require direct viewer interaction, but it can; and different projects result in different levels of viewer participation. Some projects are explicitly open to more than “looking,” and some (like the wheel) are ambiguous in regard to viewer interaction. The wheel does move, which was very important to us, but it is a little uncertain whether you should spin it, or even if it does spin. The wheel is more a promise of interaction and as a result sets up a dilemma in the gallery space, creating some tension around the art object, the audience’s role, and even the gallery’s ability to navigate this ambiguity. Regardless of how hands-on audience participation ends up being, we are always very conscious of how we hold the viewer’s attention, what we give people to focus on. And we generally side with maximal engagement, making works that we know will be readable by a variety of viewers and different types of audiences. I think we have a specific kind of respect for our viewers that manifests into a lot of tangible and visible effort. Ultimately, we cherish opportunities to present objects and ideas to the public and work accordingly. One aspect about the collective related to audience considerations is the group’s large number. As we brainstorm or make a work, we tend to act as an audience. Because each of us requires unique (and sometimes similar) things from a project in order to be satisfied, we gravitate towards an egalitarian horizon, which translates into a kind of de-facto politics or ideology of heterogeneity. That may sound a little heady, but it is one way to try and understand our relationship to each other and to our audiences.

A while ago at Austin Museum of Art’s Laguna Gloria (AMOA and Arthouse have since merged) you were among a group of artists that were chosen to design a hole for a Miniature Golf installation . . . Your hole is entitled “School Night” . . . What did you take into consideration, what were your models, Augusta or Austin’s world famous Peter Pan MiniGolf . . .

It was really nice to be invited to participate in this. Miniature Golf and similar attractions are a subject we were already very interested in as a group and so we tried to look at it as a pretext to make an artwork that we would have made regardless of an overlapping purpose. Once that was established, we focused on what we found interesting about mini golf locations like Austin’s Peter Pan MiniGolf in the first place, as it exists in culture, rather than what might be interesting about an artist’s take on designing a golf hole in a museum setting. We were interested in how those kinds of places can evoke a transitional state of growing up. A time that involves jumping fences and lobbing empty bottles, before being able to officially join the nightlife of the twenty-one and older ranks. We’re happy with it as an artwork and look forward to showing it where it can be seen in a context with our other work.

Indeed, it looks as if the golf hole has made it way into another work . . . “Long Plays”. What’s your view of recycling ideas or pieces . . .

“School Night” was shown recently in our solo exhibition “Long Plays” at Mark Moore Gallery in LA. We were happy to show that work amongst other bodies of work in order to properly contextualize it. When seemingly disparate bodies of our work are exhibited in one space the viewer has an opportunity to follow the threads and see larger patterns in our thinking. Okay Mountain is happy to recycle ideas and works, as long as we are not being redundant. Each time we brainstorm on a new project we gravitate towards subjects we have touched on in the past. Inevitably, we see these subjects in a new light or make a new connection to them within our practice. Certain subjects have consistently resonated deeply with the group as a whole. Our artistic identity was formed in the explorations of these notions and those explorations will continue to grow and compound one another.

Finally, I am interested not just in the collaborative aspect of your practice as a group, but how that practice extends from being a dealer/gallery to an artists’ collaborative—the give, take of the viewer, the context, the artist, the collector. Can you please elucidate on these multifarious relationships . . . and Okay Mountain’s various hats . . .

In a certain sense, I think Okay Mountain’s multifarious relationships are central to organization’s vitality. Because each of the members wear so many hats, I think each of us gain greater perspective of our activities, as well as one another. When we started Okay Mountain, we were just a group of artists that wanted to be around art that excited us. In order to run the gallery each of us had to acquire certain skill sets ranging from roof tarring to public speaking. It has always been our model to trade off and give somebody else an opportunity to try something new—whether it be cleaning the bathroom, curating an exhibition, or working closely with a collector. This is not just an ideological, egalitarian thing either—it has to function this way or everything would fall apart. This practice extends into the collective, as well. Each collective project has been quite different from the previous projects because we want/need to try new things. The group is composed of individuals with diverse interests and backgrounds and in order to keep ourselves excited and focused we have to challenge ourselves. Over the years we have realized that whether we are doing studio visits, working in our personal studios, managing our rental studios, or working on projects with the collective, each and every one of these activities impact and influence one another . . . which is a good thing.



Okay Mountain is: Carlos Rosales-Silva, Josh Rios, Justin Goldwater, Ryan Hennessee, Nathan Green, Peat Duggins, Michael Sieben, Sterling Allen, Tim Brown . . . each question is answered by a different member. There are nine questions and nine Mountaineers, more group security and group anonymity . . .

Photos courtesy of Okay Mountain.

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