# Groups and Spaces: Mapping Collaborative Cultural Production and Social Art Practices

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**ABSTRACT**

*What does it mean to collaborate? To be in a group? To work together? To occupy space?*

In every place, wherever there are people, groups form and spaces are used. Most often these spaces are for living or for working, but every once in a while groups form and spaces are utilized to experiment and create.

*Groups and Spaces* is an online platform that gathers together information on people making art in collaborative situations and independently-run artist spaces. The site serves as a dynamic forum for critical discourse on collaborative cultural production and artist-run culture. The project explores ways to visualize and represent relationships and the associative impacts of collaborative groups and spaces through sociogramming applications, geolocation technologies, and a mobile library unit.

The article will discuss the variables and systems involved in collecting and disseminating information through these new applications. The article will also discuss how the visual mapping of collaborative art practices can be framed as a dynamic learning resource and as an asset for schools, institutions, and art communities.

## COLLECTIVE HISTORIES

In 1970, 112 Workshop/112 Greene Street was opened as a not-for-profit exhibition space by Jeffrey Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark in New York City. In 1971, Carol Godden along with Matta-Clark and others turned the space into a restaurant run by artists. The project was called FOOD.

"I am writing because I feel you are the chosen one: the perfect subject for a culinary communion as the modern world has long forgotten. I have in part decided that my mission in opening this restaurant is to restore the art of eating with love instead of fear. This very Christian ideal precludes the horror of eating loved ones or in turn being consumed out of love."[2]

It was a place where artists served as guest chefs, filmmakers stirred the soup, and writers sculpted mash potatoes. FOOD was where many groups met; FOOD was a space c created independent of institutions—it was a space for people and for groups.

In the early part of this decade a group of people set out to investigate the historic and contemporary formation of artist groups and independent art spaces like 112 Workshop around the world. Initiated by members of Chicago-based art group, *Temporary Services*,[3] the research was called Groups and Spaces; a project to gather together information on people making art in groups and collaborative situations, groups that run art spaces, and independently run artist spaces and centres. The purpose of the project was to explore the nature and condition of collaborative group work within art communities both past and present.

Since that time, the site has existed as a resource for multiple parties interested in tracing the roots of obscure or inactive art groups and spaces. What has emerged through this list, is a collective history that tells the story of artistic process outside of the realm of institutional constraints. A catalog, moreover, of artist-run culture
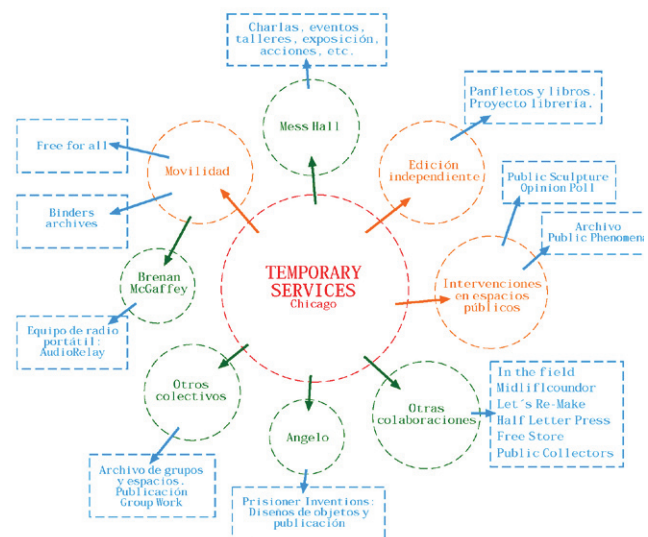


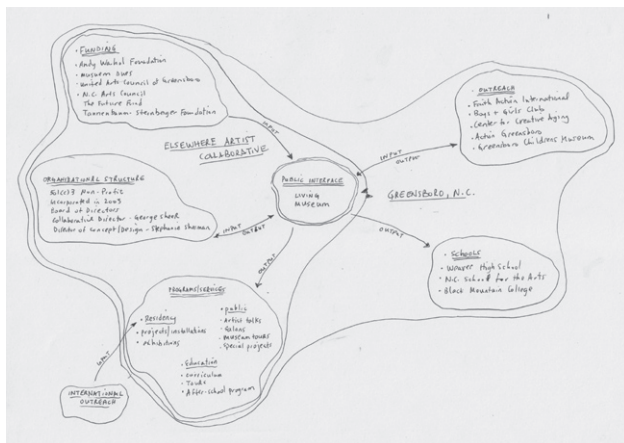*Resources and Human Resources at Temporary Services*

that is now proving an invaluable resource to artists who are struggling economically and look toward alternative models of operation as response. As the list of groups and spaces accrued it was not immediately apparent that the these groups were part of a larger culture of collectivity and collaboration—a way of making art that is built upon the idea of working together.[4]

The founders of the project believe that the mere intention of working with other people is in itself a valuable thing to document and investigate. It reflects upon current social dynamics and value-systems, which at times lean toward the individual and yet somehow career back toward the tribal. It is in our bones to work in groups and re-imagine the use of spaces in order to provide opportunities for participation and new ways of experiencing the world. The interpretation that artists embody provides us with a unique visualization of the power of group-work. It represents, if nothing else, our desire to understand each other and the systems in which we live.

### THE DATABASE OF MY DREAMS

I once had a dream about a database that would house the collective knowledge of artists working with people within social situations. I imagined it would resemble a rhizome reminiscent of the structures Deleuze and Guattari[5] theorized about in 1972; an undulating system of control functions with inputs, outputs, and feedback loops surrounding a central node, each able to change positions over time.

Rhizomes are based on differential production and cartography, in other words, on a map which is constantly being built, unfolded, and reappropriated by others. They are "always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits."[6]



*Sketch of the groups and spaces rhizome*



*Groups and Spaces entry profiles or nodes*

I thought intensely about such a system: its internal functions, how to visualize such a network, and how to represent it with language. This dream inspired my journey around the country in 2009 to meet art groups and investigate art spaces.

Along the way I became increasingly preoccupied with methods of mapping that would help to visualize the relationships within the larger systems that these groups and spaces were a part of. I began to imagine a web platform for easily searching and visualizing the cultural resources in a specific community that might otherwise be undetected. A mechanism, moreover, to explore the inner workings of art groups and spaces—to see to whom they are connected, to see how they function, and why. The idea of exploding systems of collaborative social practice became a core objective of my research.

Not long after I embarked on my trip, on the windy shores of Lake Michigan, I met Brett Bloom. Brett was one of the founding members of Temporary Services. As we discussed my research, it dawned on us that our shared interests in cataloging and mapping artist-run culture should be a joint effort. Our goal from then on was to revamp the Groups and Spaces site into an open source and dynamic platform.

Until recently, the site had remained an HTML page with hyperlinks and an e-mail address to submit new entries to the growing list of artist groups and groups that ran art spaces. But with the assistance of Scott Rigby

of *Basekamp*, an independent art space and group in Philadelphia, we developed a new site using Drupal. This enabled us to import the contents of the existing HTML site and create profiles (or nodes) for each group or space. A new system now allows users to edit and add information about who they are, what they do, how they work, and why. Each entry is seen as an opportunity to collaborate, to gain inspiration, to ask questions, and to see how things really work in relationship to restrictive infrastructure and financial concerns.

Each group, or space, in the database is not a mere entry or profile, rather it should be seen as a central node through which multiple relationships begin. Art groups, for instance, have multiple members, each of which in turn are connected to various communities, groups of people, and projects. Each project the group takes on is connected to varied locations, organizations, and people. Art spaces, although fixed, could be related to various art groups and artists who work locally—or perhaps globally. The connections are endless. Our interest with Groups and Spaces is to map connections that help to color a cultural ecosystem. These connections are comprised not just of institutions like art museums and galleries, but the system of people, non-profits, schools, and cultural organizations that may never be otherwise characterized in terms of "art."
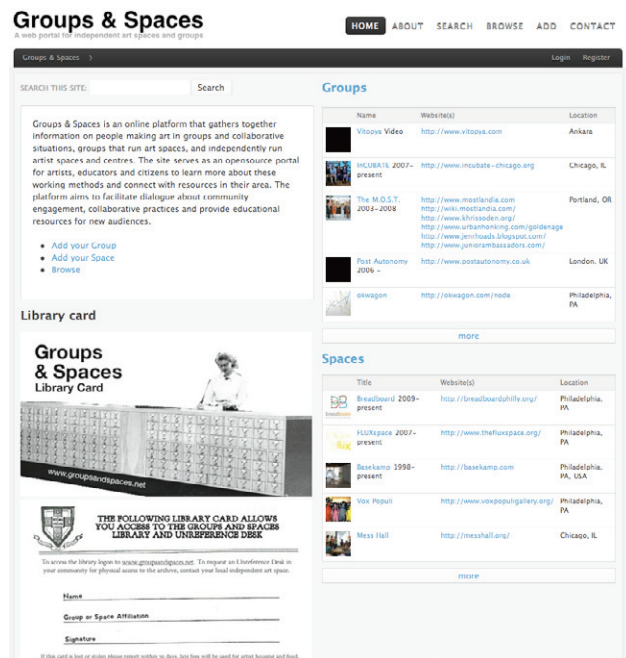


*The Groups and Spaces Homepage*

### DATABASES ARE REALLY JUST ANALOG MOUNTAINS

Since the initial reconstruction the vision of Groups and Spaces has moved toward experimenting with mapping the associative impacts of artist-run spaces and groups in ways that are vernacular and widely accessible. We seek to do this through dynamic mapping functions and through visualizing the multiple relationships of each group or space through network diagramming. The project is itself a collaborative effort, including the collaboration between contributors past and present. We advance slowly with the concurrent generosity of time and expertise offered from volunteers or the group.

The one thing that keeps us united is a sincere belief in the value of this resource, a resource that allows us to understand the unseen geography of ideation and the generative creativity that is tied to the shared histories of each group and space. Groups and spaces allows us to collaborate and glimpse at new ideas for living—from architecture and food production to barter and health care. Building networks offers us a plausible alternative to the otherwise broken infrastructure around us.

### WE CAN SOCIOGRAM OUR WAY OUT OF ANYTHING

In 1933, Joseph Moreno pioneered the notion of the *sociogram*, a representation of the social interactions between people or groups of people. Through sociograms he illustrated that *large-scale* social phenomena, such as the economy and state, were sustained and modified over time by the *small-scale* configurations formed by people's patterns of friendship for one another, dislike for one another, and types of reciprocal relations.[7] The notion of sociograms is now something we take for granted, most popularly known through social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. But what would it mean to re-imagine the notion of the sociogram to help visualize linkages between artist-run culture and other social systems? Could it provide us with clues into mapping and organizing information that is socially dynamic and constantly in flux?

Currently, a number of software programs allow one to input data such as location, names, and other information in order to create dynamic maps of relationships between points of data. One such program called NodeXL, a project of the Social Media Research Foundation, it allows one to import spreadsheets of data and produce network graphs. Another programs that enables this is Flare, an Adobe Flash-based Action Script library application. We have been actively experimenting with both applications, trying to develop a way to create a sociogramatic function for each entry in the database.
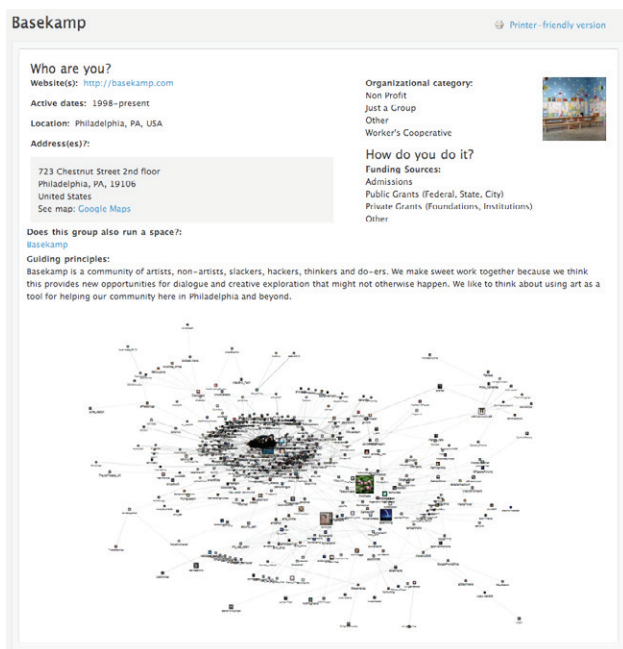
*A sociogram, as pioneered by Joseph Moreno in 1933*

The idea is to allow a sociogramatic rhizome to emerge. Such a sociogram is to be built upon the existing infrastructure of each entry and the expected data collection points that will accrue as users add information to each group and space node. At the time of this article, when a user creates an entry in the system, you can locate a group and/or space that is connected to your entry. Other elements like funding sources, intentional/unintentional impacts, organizational models, and physical location will all serve as potential connectors to a larger web of groups and spaces in the database.

The hope is that these relationships will become the cornerstone for an ever-expanding universe of connections. This is particularly intriguing and worth pursuing—it is an opportunity to map out concurrent social systems, dynamic variables, and useful histories. These relationships will become highly visible when artistic production is a central element. Why? Because cultural ecosystems extend into multiple realms, not in isolation to each other, but rather as an aggregate that provides us insight into the formation of community. This will further provide insight and awareness respecting social issues—and how we choose to act on these perceptions.

Consider the work of the collaborative art group The Future Farmers. In 2007 they initiated Victory Gardens in San Francisco, a project that resurrects the notion of WWII patriotism through local food production. In collaboration with multiple non-profits and gardeners all over the city,

they created the city's largest community garden on the front lawn of city hall. Although the gesture itself was significant, the connections and relationships forged through the project were even greater. Imagine that we could access this art group from the Groups and Spaces database. One could then leverage this resource to view the major parties involved and see essential logistical information: funding streams, narratives, or measurable outcomes (like pounds of food harvested and lands reclaimed). One can envision through this example the numerous immediate connections to other art spaces, groups and community organizations. When selected it could then become the central node in a vast network—able to be utilized as a map for social change.

Finally, our goal is to make the sociogramatic rhizome function for the Groups and Spaces platform, an art project in itself. One group we are already working with is the *Transductores*[8] project, coordinated by Javier Rodrigo. This project utilizes the idea of the transducer as a metaphor and tool for researching and connecting socially-engaged art practices and pedagogies. A *transducer* is a device able to transform or convert a certain type of input energy into a different type of output energy, causing complex growth.

Using the transducer as a way to understand and theorize about social networks, Rodrigo believes transducers act as triggers or catalysts for social change. They open sustainable possibilities of transformation that are highly integrated into the social fabric of a place or community. The project takes the form of exhibitions, essays, and collaborative educational projects that explore the spatial politics of organizational structures. Working with graduate students, cultural institutions and other organizations, the project provides an opportunity interdisciplinary groups to emerge and flexibly coordinate through artistic practices, political interventions. and education.



*The Future Farmers at Victory Gardens, San Francisco*

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## WHERE ARE WE IN SPACE AND TIME?

Another crucial upgrade to the Groups and Spaces platform will be an interactive mapping function that will enable users to search the database by zip code or other locative data. The hope is to establish a direct connection to the sociogramming functions on the site, so that multiple filters and layers can be used to geographically map the locations and reach of groups and spaces in the database. One of the developers behind the project is hoping to experiment with customized modules like *OpenLayers* via Drupal (http://drupal.org/project/openlayers) that enable users to combine maps from different map providers with data from Views and CCK input. Other programs like *Post-GIS* are also being considered as potential infrastructure for a unique mapping function that support geographic objects in the PostgreSQL object-relational database.

Just like sites such as Sourcemap.org, which allow users to generate information based on geography and the life cycle of a product, Groups and Spaces will be a place to map geographic connections, cultural production, and collaborative process. This will allow the platform to visually map art groups that may have members on several continents and convene for special projects every so often. It will also provide a unique way to visually map a regional/localized art group's sphere of influence.

## GROUPS AND SPACES MOBILE UNIT:
## AN UN-REFERENCE DESK

Underscoring all of the technological aspects of Groups and Spaces' online presence, is the intention to experiment with physically manifesting the contents of the database in the real world. As we explored possibilities, our thoughts immediately coalesced around the idea of re-thinking the Library, which itself is a tactile and recognizable system of organization.

In debating the problems and contemporary uses of a library, the idea emerged to create a mobile unit, a library on wheels that would physically house the contents of Groups and Spaces. It would serve not just as a static depository but as a dynamic place for exchange. The mobile archive would consist of 8.5" × 11" printouts of each entry, and the mobile unit itself would provide a physical interface to consult with people about the platform's contents.

The main point of engagement in a conventional library, *the reference-and-checkout desk*, served as inspiration for the mobile unit. Here one converses with actual people: Transactions are made, transactions are recorded, and trust is imparted. However, this is often a one-sided relationship: people take things from the library and then bring them back. The library itself is not open to insertion from the public; instead, it is a closed system in which the contents are determined by a third party.



*Groups and Spaces will be a place to map geographic connections, cultural production, and the collaborative process.*
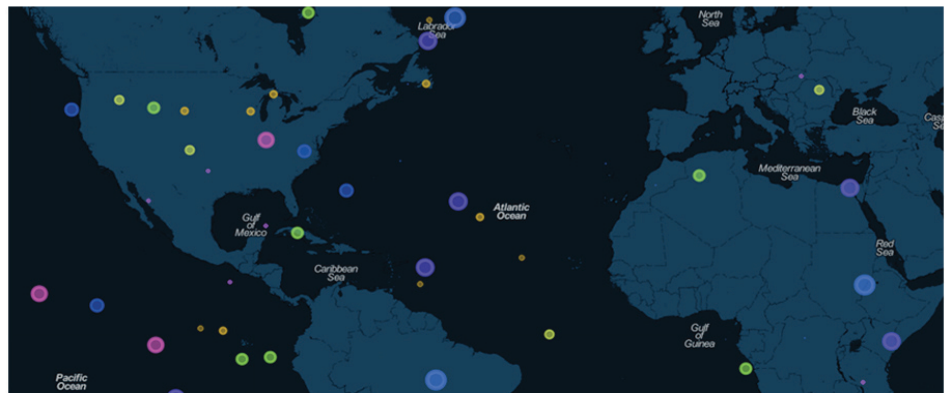
Working to subvert this system, the Groups and Spaces Mobile Unit re-imagines the idea of the reference desk as a point of exchange. The result is the *Un-Reference Desk*, where the extraction of content from the database is balanced by insertion of local collective knowledge. The interface therefore is built upon the idea of *mutual reciprocity*: something is given and something taken by both parties. The unit offers information about art groups and spaces and also catalogues information from local contributors concerning the impact of those groups and spaces on a situated community.

The design for the unit is being coordinated by Janette Kim and Josh Draper of Columbia University's Graduate School for Architecture and Planning. Kim and Draper have developed an ingenious way to merge the primary components of the mobile unit. The central storage unit houses a matrix of mason jars used to store specimens and artifacts. The vertical façade, a conventional design element appropriated from a street vendor's cart, extends out of the central storage unit. Located within the underbelly of the cart are folding chairs that provides an impromptu classroom space, an on-site laboratory, or simply a social space for people to have tea and talk. Overall, the unique design creates a point of curiosity and whimsy. However, the Un-reference Desk is also a practical tool capable of traveling to public spaces, university campuses, and art and community spaces.

The plans and budget of the Un-reference Desk will be made public on the Groups and Spaces site. The idea is to enable any independent art space or group to customize and construct their own unit for use in their specific community.
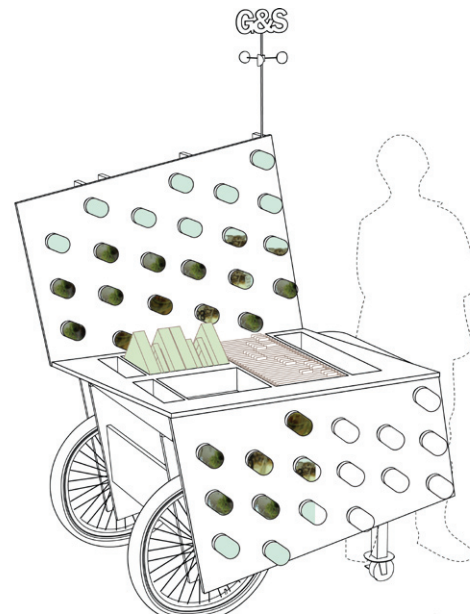


*A drawing of the Un-reference Desk illustrating the matrix of the mason jars used to archive specimens within the central storage unit. Also visible is the vertical façade, an appropriation from contemporary street vendor's carts.*
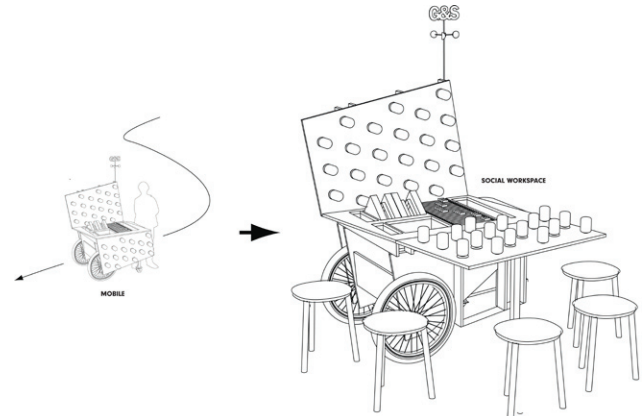


*A second drawing of the Un-reference Desk illustrating the deployment of the folding chairs housed within the underbelly of the mobile unit.*

## GROUPS AND SPACES IS A GROUP EFFORT: JOIN US

Groups and Spaces provides a portal into the complex world of the collaborative process and the varied use of spaces for cultural production. Each group and each space is a node from which historical and cultural connections can be mapped, and, through the use this newfound understanding, perhaps altered altogether. At each nexus, we are offered a glimpse of how artists respond to their current conditions, how they work together in a group, and express this collectivity.

The Groups and Spaces project is an ongoing endeavor. We invite anyone to join us who is interested in helping to explore potential technologies and applications that compliment the project's content. Currently, our biggest obstacle is expertise and time. Those with the needed expertise have little time, and those with time do not have the expertise to finish the intended components of the site. In keeping with the inclusive nature of the platform we hope this will continue to be a group effort, led by many.

*The productive realm of communication, finally, makes it abundantly clear that innovation always necessarily takes place in common. Such instances of innovation in networks might be thought of as an orchestra with no conductor—an orchestra that through constant communication determines its own beat and would be thrown off and silenced only by the implosion of a conductor's central authority. We have to rid ourselves of the notion that innovation relies on the genius of the individual. If there is an act of genius, it is the genius of the multitude.* [9]

### BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Lee Kennedy is the Director of the Institute for Applied Aesthetics, a research-based thinking tank for art and learning. http://www.applied-asthetics.org

**1** Unfortunately, due to legal issues the site remains at http://groupsandspaces.artiscycle.net/drupal/ instead of www.groupsandspaces.net. The URL for the site was registered nearly ten years ago. The company no longer exists and so we are currently in a legal battle to gain ownership of the site which was registered under multiple names over the years.

**2** Gordon Matta Clark, "A Matta's Proposal," August 1, 1971. (From FOOD: An Exhibition by White Columns, New York, curated by Catherine Morris, October 3, 1999– January 2, 2000).

**3** The project itself was a group effort including participation by Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julin, Marc Fischer, Gregory Sholette, Scott Rigby, Ava Bromberg, and Daniel Tucker, among others.

**4** Brett Bloom, http://www.groupsandspaces.net.

**5** Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Volume 2: A Thousand Plateaus* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

**6** Deleuze and Guattari. *Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Volume 2: A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

**7** Scott, John, *Social Network Analysis: A Handbook. Sage Publications*, 1996.

**8** *Transductores* is a project of Centro José Guerrero of Granada, devised from Aulabierta, and co-produced by Universidad Internacional de Andalucía-UNIA arteypensamiento and the Ministry of Culture, Spain. http://transductores.net/

**9** Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, "Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire," *Group Work* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).