

## **793 POSSIBILITIES AND HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF IT?<sup>1</sup>** **by Erin Elder**

This essay appears in *1730 Great Highway*, a catalog published in conjunction with the exhibition *The Institute for Social Research and The Discovery of Art God* presented at the Richmond Art Center June 10 – July 26, 2008 and the Württembergischer Kunstverein August 16 – 24, 2008. Erin Elder is organizing these related projects; she is an independent curator based in San Francisco.

Built on sand dunes and cliffs, fault lines and landfill, San Francisco has been destroyed by fire and earthquake numerous times, only to reinvent itself as an eccentric symbol of tenacity and innovation. Since its early days, San Francisco has been both a sanctuary and a laboratory to which people have fled to change their names, to outrun the law, to make a fortune, or to simply get swept up by the energy of this beautiful and progressive cosmopolitan city that thrives from its precarious perch above the mighty Pacific Ocean.

Today San Francisco is a matrix of sky rises and transit lines, famous landmarks and well-kept parks. It is comprised of abutting neighborhoods that each have distinctive character and are inhabited by a constant flux of tourists, college students, migrant workers, and traveling businesspeople who pay some of the highest rents in the world in exchange for their must-have San Francisco experience.

There is a fantasy about San Francisco that draws people to this city and that results in ambitious forms of cultural production that have ranged from the invention of LSD and Google to the formation of The United Nations and Burning Man. During the 1960s and 70s, the city was a hotbed for radical political action but also for art initiatives such as The Diggers, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Bonnie Sherk's Crossroads Community Farm that together comprise a moment of living differently through collaborative art practice.<sup>2</sup> Clearly influenced

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase was crafted during a brainstorming session with the Institute for Social Research that sought to name their upcoming exhibition at the Richmond Art Center. Although we eventually decided against applying it to the exhibition, this title references some essential aspects of the ISR project – their sense of expansive (yet limited) possibility and their desperate need to constantly make sense of their experience as it happens – and seems appropriate for this essay that doesn't give instructions for understanding anything, but rather muses about the practice of making sense out of openness. For the ISR, figuring out the meaning and the nature of their collective process is an on-going practice that only leads to more questions and, therefore more to make sense of.

<sup>2</sup> More information about projects, that set the stage for San Francisco as a playground for conceptual art/life practices, can be found in: Doyle, Michael William. "Staging the Revolution: Guerrilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965-68," *Imagine Nation*. New York: Routledge, 2002. p. 71-97. Purves, Ted. *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. Bradley, Will. *Radical Software Or. The*

by this legacy, a group of international art students called The Institute for Social Research (ISR) chose San Francisco as the place in which to conduct a communal living experiment.

The ISR was born out of a friendship between two established artists – Brian Conley and Christian Jankowski – who instigated a partnership between their respective institutions, California College of the Arts in San Francisco and Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Kuenste in Stuttgart, Germany. They aimed to bring graduate students from Stuttgart to the Bay Area for a lively artistic exchange that would be fueled by the students' own sense of agency.

Just days before the arrival of the German students, an exhaustive search resulted in the last minute rental of a home on Ocean Beach. 1730 Great Highway is an orange house built in the typical style of San Francisco's Outer Sunset District and sits facing the Pacific Ocean, which blows sand across the doorstep and into the house. Aptly named, the Sunset District is situated on the furthest west edge of San Francisco; it is quiet and primarily residential with remarkable access to nature, nestled between Golden Gate Park to the north and the SF Zoo to the south. On the periphery and somewhat isolated from the city's urban core, 1730 was an ideal incubator for communal activity and yet was a well-positioned hub for adventuring into the greater Bay Area.

1730 is a 3BR/2BA house with a boxy and rather illogical layout; it was leased unfurnished but boasts backyard, deck, courtyard, garage, washer/drier, and a sound-proofed music room complete with grand piano and recording equipment. In this house the ISR held weekly meetings, ate most meals, slept, talked about ideas in numerous languages, and anxiously charted the passage of time. Christoph pitched a tent in the bedroom, Kamil slept under the piano. A desk became a bed and a bed became a desk. Sofas were dragged in from the street and Rosa made drawings of the group's salvaged silverware.

It was in this place that the group experienced a notable earthquake on October 30th and the notorious Cosco Busan oil spill that, for weeks, washed black globules up onto the beach. When Rosa was violently attacked by a neighborhood vagrant on November 21st, it was in this house that she was questioned by police and press and carefully nursed back to health. It's interesting to consider how the ISR may have developed differently had it been housed in a SoMa loft, in a tenement hotel in the Tenderloin, in rural Iowa or New York City. For whatever serendipitous reason, the beach house in San Francisco was the Petri dish for the development of the ISR.

I met the Institute for Social Research in October and was asked to be the ISR's curator mere weeks before their physical dissolution in December of 2007, just

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Post-Competitive. Comparative Game of a Free Culture. San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2006.

before the beach house lease was over and the semester ended. Now, six months into the new year, the group continues to work together on this collaboratively-designed catalog and two upcoming exhibitions. And I struggle to understand who they are from a distance. Oceans of time and space create new challenges for our continued collaboration, while tasking the ISR with collective reinvention. The beach house and the group's time in San Francisco was intensely formative and is the focus of this backward-looking essay, but it is important to note that the ISR lives on (at least until the exhibitions close) and presents itself as an opportunity to think about experimental pedagogy and the potency of togetherness.

### **The Evolution of Everyday Life**

The Institute for Social Research developed in spite of being a class. Although credits were assigned by California College of the Arts (CCA) for this course that was organized by Christian Jankowski and simply entitled "Commune," there were no assigned readings, formal critiques, or grades; in fact, there was very little activity that resembled school. "Commune" is one of several classes that CCA has initiated in the last several years that introduce self-organization into the art school context, the timing of which coincide with the school's newly founded Social Practice MFA program and also reference a shift towards intensive laboratory-style course offerings. While these programming initiatives reflect CCA's interest in supporting collaborative or interdisciplinary practices, they also evidence a localized climate in the Bay Area that seems to privilege process-oriented art production over the manufacture of objects.

The ISR grew out of an intentional scholastic void, one that required students to collectively negotiate and claim as their own; but it was primarily a formula for art-making. The pressure to produce quality artworks both for advancement in the classroom and for exhibition in the art world was a constantly motivating force. It was clear to the ISR (and Christian was often reminding the group) that the value of their experience would depend greatly on the production of something tangible. Fortunately, the group came to San Francisco bedecked with numerous video cameras, sound recording devices, hard drives, laptop computers and a set of corresponding electrical adapters. The communal pool of technology allowed the group to obsessively document months worth of daily activity as well as the stuff that filled up the house's initial emptiness.

In the beginning, the ISR made work by proposing project ideas to the group for internal discussion and development. This method of proposal encouraged individual authorship and often relied on the group as a workforce, a band of laborers or actors, a set of bodies who followed instructions for the project's physical production. For instance, Christina's *Beach Burial* (a set of beautifully crafted photographs documenting the ISR neck-deep in Ocean Beach sand) and Marco's *Breathing Bridge* (a polished video of the group passing a single breath from mouth to mouth against the backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge) are both

aesthetically driven and intentionally documented artworks in which the group functions to produce one singularly authored artistic vision. While this tactic produced a set of projects that are – in the spectrum of ISR creations – perhaps most easily consumed as artworks, I don't believe they represent the most interesting mode of collaboration and togetherness.

One of the only class assignments required the students to locate instances of communal living by performing individual outside research. There were two weeks set aside for class members to make trips into the greater Bay Area and beyond. Some projects that resulted from the outside research include *Tree Sitters*, in which Helena examines a guerilla activist camp on UC's Berkeley campus; Martina's *How to Become a Hippie* is a meditation on the Janis Joplin tree and the hippie population in Golden Gate Park; and *Scout* which documents Florian's wild ride through the back roads of Northern California with Brock and Dallas, buddies who moved from Ohio to an out-of-the-way logging town. This outside research produced an amazing set of narratives (many involve hitchhiking and the mercy of strangers) but don't necessarily come through in the form of legible artworks.

The group talks about the early days of the ISR when they struggled to understand what held them together, the basis of the class being too minimal and the notion of a commune too obtuse. Although the project was built with San Francisco's progressive legacy in mind, the students were not brought together around a set of utopian ideas, nor did they have overt political aims. They recall Christian's initial influence – his fantastic charisma paired with a set of art-making demands – and at times joked about being "Jankowski's Commune." At one point the ISR bought a Ken doll that bared uncanny resemblance to Christian (which actually shows up in several artworks and documentations), positioned alternately as idol and voodoo doll. Christian did not live with the group and was often traveling elsewhere; his role as an authority figure was frequently challenged and eventually somewhat abandoned. Between the ISR's calculating "institute" and their messy "commune" is a resistance to formal structures and traditional leadership that, on the one hand, breeds the creation of alternate structures and, on the other, permits a total free-for-all. Their commitment to spontaneity and authenticity produced an energetic ricochet between extremes and amongst people, which is precisely the glue that seems to hold the group together.

The term "Institute for Social Research" evolved from the German phrase "Institut der Lebenskünste," which literally translates as "Institute of Living Art." The ISR was decided as the group's shared identity even before arriving in San Francisco. The Institute for Social Research was a generic front that gave the group cohesion and direction. As a self-organized collective that studied the nature of social interaction, they were able to adopt a quasi-scientific approach to their togetherness under the guise of an official agency. Their commitment to the

hands-on research of “living art,” paired with the absence of rules, expectations, or structures (not to mention the lack of beds, daily provisions, or cashflow), allowed the artists to make meaning out of anything that entered into their conceptual or physical space. The all-day, every-day collision of people who didn’t necessarily know each other beforehand (and who spoke numerous languages, coming from a vast spectrum of places) was a potent formula for creative problem solving, one that the group voraciously studied and documented.

In 1919 the Dadaist Tristan Tzara wrote that “the new artist protests. He no longer paints: he creates directly.” Sixty years later Raoul Vaneigem claimed that the new artist creates situations to be lived, this construction of situations being fundamental to the revolution of everyday life which in turn makes way for a new world order.<sup>3</sup> The ISR was provided a space in which to create daily life directly, a situation that was built by spontaneity and protest. Although the ISR was, on the surface, rather apolitical, they belong to a lineage of radical artists, thinkers, and teachers, whose tools (situations, happenings, life frames, and more) the ISR used to continue the forever-incomplete project of merging art and life. With an inexhaustible, inward-looking curiosity they charted their own attempts to “expand the concept of art to include, and even be life.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The Technology of Togetherness**

Rosa talks about the group’s dynamic using a boat metaphor. The boat sets out in a particular direction carrying a load of people and as the journey continues, individuals become disenchanted with the process and jump overboard. The boat must then turn around and establish a new direction, gathering the lost ones onboard for another go of it. This process repeats itself again and again and, therefore, the voyage is marked by moments of group negotiation and collectively designed redirection. Rather than distances traversed or particular destinations, the ISR is committed to noticing how cultivated group intelligence might change the regular course of action. This metaphor may not be entirely accurate (in fact, several students jumped overboard, emphatically drifting away from the ISR; there were numerous mutinies, of a quiet or temporary nature) but this image of the meandering boat has been important for the group to articulate a shared set of unconventional priorities.

Throughout this journey the camera served as an archiving tool that helped to amass visible proof of the group’s activities. The aggregate product is impressive

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<sup>3</sup> Vaneigem, Raoul. “The Revolution of Everyday Life: The Reversal of Perspective,” *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, 1967. [www.nothingness.org](http://www.nothingness.org).

<sup>4</sup> This is quote could have easily come from the mouth of the ISR but is how Bonnie Sherk describes the aspirations for her work. Throughout her 30-year career Sherk’s work is discussed in terms of “life frames” which, for Sherk, is a way to see the construction of situations and the potential for using “art as a tool to create a whole.” Bradley, Will. “Let It Grow,” *Frieze*, October 2005, p. 189-90.

if not overwhelming, but what interests me most about this scenario is how technology, particularly the camera, became a perception tool – or as Stan Brakhage might say, “a moving visual thinking” – for the ISR’s expanding sense of purpose.<sup>5</sup> The camera functioned as an ever-present audience and therefore invested significance in everyday life by allowing the ISR to witness itself in each moment and then repeatedly thereafter. This constant framing and reframing was a daily practice in documentation and as the camera gave form to even the most mundane activities, the group tasked themselves with making sense of their experience *in situ*. The potency of experimental film, as described by Gene Youngblood, the forefather of the 1970s Expanded Cinema movement, are relevant here. He says, “[It] isn’t a movie at all: like life it’s a process of becoming, man’s ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes.”<sup>6</sup>

The lives of the ISR were captured on camera and yet it seems that their lives were actually lived *for* the camera; there is a rift here that creates a productive confusion between fact and fiction. The resulting double-readings, mistranslations, and happy slippages are the reverie of the ISR and evidence the importance of the camera in provoking collapses between audience and actor, intention and actuality, past and present, life and art.

There are many projects that aim to sum up some sort of group phenomenon; for instance, Lilith’s *Partner Look* showcases inadvertent similarities in how ISR members dress or eat; Marco’s network drawings diagram group dynamics; Rosa’s *Day Drawings* chart the physical movement of each ISR member throughout a given day. These works attempt to make visible the nuances of daily experience. They track and graph and analyze and yet a lyricism sneaks into undermine the science of their obsessive documentation.

If we think about technology in the broadest sense – a society’s implementation and use of various tools, skills, and methods as well as the body of knowledge informing this use – the ISR worked with its own togetherness as a kind of technology. The group’s sense of critical mass, their ability to produce an incredible amount of work, and their willingness to collaborate on numerous levels generated a significant force that *was* their own togetherness. Sometimes this togetherness functioned as a tool, other times it was source material for investigation. The most interesting moments to me are when this togetherness was used as a method or a motivation, when the group seems to ask: how does simply being together become a generative means of production? What happens when people pursue an idea together without intended outcomes? How does failure function when everyone is invested in a collective experience?

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<sup>5</sup> Stan Brakhage was an experimental filmmaker who, incidentally lived in San Francisco in 1953 before moving to New York to join a larger art scene. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stan\\_Brakhage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stan_Brakhage).

<sup>6</sup> Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970, p. 41.

*The Molecule Project* was a rather volatile experiment in togetherness during which the group bound itself with ropes in the form of a molecule and set out into the city for the duration of Halloween night. The group refused to break apart and thus negotiated all situations – including bar cover charges, taxicab rides, bathroom breaks and dancing – as one cohesive organism. *The Sleeping Project*, by comparison, was a quietly private endeavor in which the ISR slept with their heads very close together for the entirety of one night to see if anything might happen (given such close proximity) to their collective subconscious. These projects test the nature of their own group intelligence and seek to understand those dynamics in order to move more fluidly – like a school of fish or a flock of birds – through various situations and places.

In many instances the ISR harnessed the power of their critical mass to do things merely for the sake of doing things. *Crawling All Day* was a challenge to move through an entire day closer to the ground, *Mannerless Dinner* was a chance to see what would happen during an evening without etiquette, *Sock Walk* was an event that invited the public to join the ISR for a walk in their socks. These projects represent a set of recognized opportunities to indulge in the absurd, to try new ways of doing things guided by curiosity and without concern for failure. Like Kaprow's Happenings, these are "events that simply happen." They "invite us to cast aside for a moment these proper manners and partake wholly in the real nature of the art and (hopefully) life."<sup>7</sup> While this mode of collaboration may seem particularly disappointing when viewed as individual projects or when framed within an art context, they are profound as a practice that cultivates collective fearlessness and the self-empowerment to create spontaneous alternative action.

When togetherness is central to the motivation or method of particular projects, the final presentation is often rather lacking, feels incomplete or illegible to an outside audience. Although the group – perhaps nagged on some level to produce artworks or proof of their experiments – might turn on the camera, it is often abandoned in a corner and forgotten entirely because these are open-ended procedures that prioritize spontaneity and the experience of being together over any particular kind of outcome. The Situationists considered these types of situation-constructions as revolutionary acts because they employ carnivalization or festivity to invert social norms and particularly because they operate outside the spectacle. I would argue that documentation is important to these situations *because* it almost always fails to capture the most fascinating and successful aspects of a project. The elusiveness of these projects is exactly what gives them value. It is those moments that resist commodification or quantification and that words are insufficient to describe that give life meaning and therefore fuel artistic production.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaprow, Allan. "Happenings in the New York Art Scene," *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. p 16, 18.

It's an interesting challenge to curate a show about the ISR, in part because their collective practice escapes traditional art categorization but also because they are shape-shifters. For several months, I didn't have any idea how many people were involved with the ISR and although particular personalities stood out as active participants, I was challenged to create a comprehensive artist list. The ISR talks about itself interchangeably as an institute, a commune, a molecule. At moments their investigations are quasi-scientific and at other times their work is anything but straight-forward.

This is the aggravating and beautiful thing about the ISR – that they enjoy collision and friction, discourse and reinvention. They are contradictory in their disregard for structures and their love of rules. Dina has said that “intentional indecisiveness” is at the core of their collective identity and yet the entire project is motivated by some desire to understand what is happening as it is happening – an obsession that involves digging deeper for more accurate (but never totally accurate) conclusions. Given the numerous language barriers, the group has grown well accustomed to things being lost or distorted or amplified through mistranslation and this mistranslation is something they treasure. To see the ISR, one must look at the composite view, comprised of densely layered internal referencing, cross-documentation, and analysis, but also acknowledging the gaps between inadequate descriptions, the cracks of broken-up structures, the celebrated space of the unknown.

During the last six months, when physical distance, time zone differences, and language barriers have challenged the group's workability, I've wondered: Is the ISR still a commune? Were they a commune in the first place? I'm not sure how to answer these questions, nor is it clear to me how the group might respond; I'm not even sure that it matters. Although I've grown to adore these artists and I constantly see new things in their work, it is not the longevity of the ISR as a collective nor their finished artworks that drive my curatorial inquiry. What interests me most is how the larger project of the ISR might be an opportunity to consider the nature of openness and also how art and its institutions stimulate, subsidize, recuperate, and assign value to those spaces of unscripted activity.

In many ways art can act as a shim to make room in which unprecedented things to happen. Art has the power to wedge itself between other fields of activity to create expansiveness for its own proliferation, in part because it is an institution defined by internal dissent and self-conscious attempts at redefinition. This power to carve out in-between spaces is possible only because some part of art remains fluid and stealthy, constantly reinventing itself beyond the margins of tradition. Art can act as a tool for expansion only if it maintains agility and innovation, if it constantly mines unforeseen possibility and consents to recuperation or fixation just enough to later subvert it. This process of reinvention, of blurring, of negotiating constant change is the precondition for art;

it is what shapes culture and keeps it free. The limits of contemporary freedom and possibility are broadened by risky art practices that stimulate discourse as they slip through new terrain.

Art can inhabit these interstitial spaces; it can be quick or bold or even mediocre in its manifestations, but what is most important about art is that it involves individuals in the direct experience of negotiating circumstances and technologies. To maintain this important cultural momentum, artists must be trained to think for themselves in situations of raw, unscripted liminality. Artists must become comfortable with discomfort, must be slippery and ever-changing, self-critical and ready for reinvention; and most importantly they must learn to boldly try, if only for the sake of mere trying. In the case of the ISR, this particular institutionalized free zone was an opportunity for individual artists to discover their own potential and to learn by doing. This act of unprescribed *doing* within an environment of self-generated rigor and critical discourse in turn offered them the tools and the courage necessary to make a life within the interstitial realm of art.

### **Naming the Unnamable**

Helena made 4,000 recordings of mundane sound. Rosa graphed the group's movements in and out of the house. Patrick drafted a manifesto and Marco made yet another network drawing. Each person attempted to visualize the energy that was (and is) the ISR. Endlessly fascinated by their inadequate attempts to understand themselves, the group continues – each in his or her own way – to capture some essence of their collective energies.

As I understand it, Art God was born out this sort of existential crisis. Mid-semester, self-inflicted sensory deprivation (a side effect of over-stimulation) had left the group raw, tired and in need of a grounding ideology. Byung-Chul introduced prayers to the ISR's daily regimen, asking for guidance, support, and authenticity from something called Art God. The group joined him in these strange rituals and within very little time Art God became part of the group's regular vocabulary, showing up in collaborative artworks, conversation, and even public events. Although the invocation of a religious icon is rather predictable or gimmicky to the eyes of an outsider and makes the group vulnerable to a host of fresh criticisms, Art God may reference some deeper discovery about their experience together and their spirited will to make art; in the context of soon-to-be art school graduates, this is important.

One poignant investigation of Art God shows up in Kamil's video *Art God Is Watching You*. In this choppy, breathtaking film, Kamil associates the video camera with the omnipotence of Art God by attaching a camera to a kite and sending it into the wind. The camera/Art God (but also the audience) looks back at earth from above where the wind is loud but the view is fantastic. Several times throughout the film, the camera endures violent nose dives, crashing into

the beach with a terrible suddenness. The artist picks Art God up, dusting it off, and reels it back up into the breeze.

Art God was created to name the unnamable. For the ISR, Art God hails the highest form of mind that seeks to make art as creation, not object. It speaks to a creativity that is beyond art schools and art exhibitions and especially beyond the art market. Art God is a concept that, in many ways, takes the place of The Institute for Social Research. As Patrick once summarized, “Now we have Art God. We don’t need to hide behind the institution anymore.”

On the last night of the ISR’s beach house commune, the group spoke to Art God in a make-shift confession booth in the back of a candle-lit van positioned on the edge of a ruckus party. These spontaneously-delivered confessions were an opportunity for reflection and closure amidst the whirlwind of pre-departure activities. Some people sang, some were very nervous; a few tears were shed. The group spoke to Art God about a range of things but mostly, interestingly, about insatiable passion. They lamented the end of their physical togetherness, wishing they’d somehow done more with their time; they spoke about making art and the terrifying risks of an evolving art practice; but mostly they spoke about love... and, as usual, molecules.

A molecule, by definition, is a tiny particle made up of multiple parts and held together by an invisible chemical bond. Despite their miniscule proportions, they collectively make up the universe; they are life and forever moving. The Institute for Social Research has discovered for themselves some aspect of this cosmic anatomy and through their artworks – ranging from great to ordinary – might provide a glimpse of the stuff, the cosmic glue, that keeps the universe alive and in motion.

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I’d like to extend my deepest gratitude to the individual members of the Institute for Social Research. Words can’t express how this project and these students have challenged and changed me. Their honesty and bravery has given this project its genuine and momentous character.

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