What are the reasons behind a newfound popularity of collectives within art economies? Could it be that collective practices are a necessary answer to the challenges faced by (creative) workers in late capitalist society? To reflect these questions, we take this text as a starting point to try to critically assess our own personal history as an internet-based research collective.

Fig. 1.
Portrait of Clusterduck Collective taken at Panke.Gallery in 2017, excerpt from the *Internet Fame* catalogue
Photo: Svenja Trierscheid – Clusterduck Collective

Over recent years collectives have often been hailed by the art world as bearers of an authentic, politically engaged practice. While most established art institutions still struggle to come to terms with the complexities of collective authorship, as the case of the 2019 edition of the Turner Prize showed, there is also an increasing willingness to include collectives into established curatorial practices - the 9th edition of the Berlin Biennale by DIS collective and the upcoming Documenta 15, curated by Jakarta-based collective ruangrupa, being significant examples.[1]

Moreover, collectives of all sizes and kinds are thriving throughout the creative industries, with an abundance of festivals and events dedicated to collective practices both in academia and in the broader cultural scene, as this publication would seem to confirm.
What are the reasons behind this newfound popularity? Could it be that collective practices are a necessary answer to the challenges faced by (creative) workers in late capitalist society?

To reflect these questions, we take this text as a starting point to try to critically assess our own personal history as an internet-based research collective. Early into this process, we realized that many of the challenges we were facing as precarized members of the so-called creative class are actually common not only to other fellow precarious digital workers. What follows is a succinct description of some of the most crucial contradictions we encountered along our path, as well as an attempt to frame them into a wider context. Where possible, we tried to give some practical suggestions about how to handle these obstacles. Where this wasn't an option, we warmly encourage constructive critique and suggestions.[2]

Birth of a Collective

According to Boris Groys, art today has its own power in the world, being as much a force in the powerplay of global politics as it once was in the arena of cold-war politics.[3] More importantly, he affirms that "under the conditions of modernity, an artwork can be produced and brought to the public in two ways: as a commodity or as a tool of political propaganda."[4]

For us, the possibility to sell our work as a commodity, at least in the traditional sense, was never really contemplated. When we first met and decided to work together, in the late weeks of 2016, we weren't even sure about the final form our common efforts would take. While our social connections predated our existence as a collective, not all of us knew each other. We had some things in common: a few digital platforms, a good number of online friends, possibly even a specific work ethos and certain generational and cultural assumptions about ourselves and the world. Ultimately, the crucial factor may have been, as so often the case, the hometown most of us shared: Florence.

Our first project was a documentary. We were all internet kids: the last generation to be born in an analogue world and the first to reach adulthood in a digital one. In a certain sense, we had grown together, the Internet and us. We felt that this was a story that deserved to be told, that there was more happening online than what could be seen from the "outside". While we collected almost 48 hours of uncut material, the documentary has yet to be finished (sponsorships are welcome). We soon realized a very basic reality of creative and artistic work: any project needs to stand on solid financial grounds if it's not to drain the resources of those realizing it (and ultimately fail). Or in other words: volunteer, unpaid labour can't – and shouldn't – compensate for the lack of financial funding, at least not forever.

As a result, we went back to the basics: yes, we had come together to create a movie. But what was beyond that? What had moved us to produce a documentary about contemporary internet subcultures? While each of us had different answers to this question, we soon realized that the underlying reason for all of us was both artistic and political. Political, because we wanted to create and produce something that would have a lasting impact on the world; artistic, because rather than through political activism in the classic sense, we felt a shared urge to attain this goal through artistic means.

And we wanted to do it together, collectively, because the process was itself part of the message we wanted to send: that either we find new ways to cooperate and collaborate, or we will fail as a species.

First Successes and Big Sacrifices

This realization was the spark that ignited everything that followed. Our first project after the documentary was a large scale IRL/URL exhibition for the *Wrong Digital Biennale* of 2017: together with a wide network of over 30 artists, colleagues and collaborators, we created a series of digital rooms, featuring works that investigated the concept of 'Internet Fame' from various perspectives. Yet still, we weren't selling artworks. While we had the luck of cooperating with an amazing Berlin based independent art institution, namely Panke.Gallery, we still had to rely on parties and self-financing in order to make it work. Truth is, we were all conducting double lives (we still are, actually): working in some corporate job during daytime, and dedicating our supposedly "free time" to the projects we loved.

Fig. 2.
Announcement for the large scale IRL/URL exhibition for the *Wrong Digital Biennale*, 2017, excerpt from the *Internet Fame* catalogue
Design: Clusterduck Collective

In fitting with this politically charged condition of self-exploitation, our next exhibition was even more explicit, bearing the word 'propaganda' already in its title. #MEMEPROPAGANDA was the inevitable outcome of a long-time interest in memes, shared by all our members, as well as an attempt to develop new narratives to counter the emerging, grossly inaccurate (and highly dangerous) portrayal of the Alt-Right movement as self-styled memetic superpower and winner of the First Great Meme War. Again, the exhibition involved a large network of collaborators and volunteers, and we made wide use of tactics, codes and aesthetics we had interiorized during our own years of political engagement. [5]

On a practical level, the work was a peculiar mixture of volunteer political work, collective artistic practice and (largely unpaid, at this stage) independent academic research. Since we all had different professional backgrounds, we were able to cover a wide set of positions, from design to copywriting to social media. The result was a large transmedia operation, composed of various modules and an online exhibition, hosted by Greencube.Gallery and documented in a catalogue.

Looking back, #MEMEPROPAGANDA was undoubtedly a big success on a professional level, as it helped us gain the peer recognition we were unknowingly striving for, while also giving us the chance to produce something we felt proud of. On a more critical level, it could be said that it also started nudging us towards a process of professionalization

which very soon forced us to follow its own, unforgiving set of rules.

Beyond Art: the Pitfalls of Professionalization

The first, immediate outcome of #MEMEPROPAGANDA was that it granted us increased access to certain funding options. These financial resources were mostly coming from academic institutions, festivals, foundations and various other non-profit actors of the cultural scene and were typically project oriented. As the funding of these institutions was often dependent on ad-hoc contributions from large governmental actors, it came at the expense of a strong degree of professionalization. Deadlines, templates, rules - all the familiar set of limitations we knew all too well from our day jobs - were suddenly an inescapable reality, which soon enough led to frictions and organizational difficulties in our group.

Moreover, applying for funds and projects usually designed for individual participation meant that any resources we could gain needed to be split between the five core members plus any collaborators we decided to involve. While we were hoping to break the patterns of self-exploitation and unpaid labour under which we had suffered for so long, these premises sometimes led to paradoxical situations. For example, involved artists would complain about their low fees until we explained how the total budget was divided, and showed them that our own individual fees were far below their own. Transparency and openness proved essential in these situations.

Another frequent misunderstanding would come from the widespread assumption that, being so many people, we could get more jobs to compensate for these problems. However, anyone who has ever been involved in any kind of open, horizontal, volunteer-based collective project, knows that this idea is at its best deeply naive. Collective practices, while unlocking rich resources and opening up new possibilities for individual members, come with a high price tag attached in terms of organizational and emotional labour, the share between the two depending on the type of collective. Contradictions in a group and frictions between its members can result in violent altercations and cause paralysis; in the worst case, they can lead to a collective's demise.

Why a Collective?

Ironically, one of the first truly difficult discussions we had to face as a group was about whether we wanted to adopt the moniker 'collective'. While most of us felt it was the right choice to describe the reality of our daily practice, some were struggling with their personal memories of the word. In Italian schools and universities, the word 'collective' is strongly connected to a very orthodox, one might even say traditionalist form of leftist militancy. In the experience of many people from our generation, politicized by the traumatic experience of the G8 in Genoa and by the tragic double failure to prevent a global war (the 2003 invasion of Iraq) and topple a populist, neofascist government (the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Berlusconi governments in the early 2000s), the word collective was evocative of never ending discussion rounds, finger pointing, magical thinking ("we're winning!"), and most of all exhausting, unpaid physical and emotional labour.

While this description definitely doesn't fit all experiences, and there surely is a healthy number of students that have fond memories of their time as young militants, these problems are not new and have plagued generations of political activists. Their detrimental effect has lately become a central subject of critique by leftist researchers, as seen for instance in the opening chapters on "folk politics" of Srnicek and Williams accelerationist monograph *Inventing the Future*.[6]

Ultimately, we settled for the term collective, agreeing that, while we weren't fully identifying with the political meaning of the term, we also weren't refusing such a connotation, thus leaving room for a certain ambiguity (in other words, we were starting to understand the allure of

political compromises.)

The next challenge we had to solve went even deeper, and has been facing artistic and political collectives ever since: what about names and authorship? Who should be credited, where, and for what? This apparently banal question can lead to ferocious discussion in any collective reality, and it's easy to see why.
At least since the 1990s, the proponents of "pure" forms of collective identity and radical anonymity have experienced a surge, both in the political and artistic discourse. Again, being politicized in late 1990s Italy meant taking the Zapatista movement, with its faceless leadership in the form of the Subcomandante Marcos, as a key model. Likewise, the Tute Bianche movement from the Centri Sociali, who rose to prominence in the altermondialiste movement, practiced radical forms of anonymity, aided by masks and white overalls, that seemed to anticipate tactics of the early Anonymous movement by almost two decades. Not to mention Italy's most famous literary collective Luther Blissett (later renamed Wu Ming), which in 1999 was celebrating a huge success with its historical novel "Q" (which some say has inspired the QAnon movement - but this, as they say, is another story).

Anonymity vs. Authorship

All the above mentioned examples were a strong source of inspiration for those among us in favour of radical anonymity. Ultimately, our choice had to be weighed against practical reasons: while some of us saw anonymous, collective authorship as a valid instrument to counter hierarchization and to criticize traditional ideas of authorship, others saw it as an unfair measure that would prevent individual merit from being recognized - a crucial aspect in a collaborative, volunteer-based work environment. We had experienced first-hand one of the oldest ideological rifts in political philosophy - the one pitching personal freedom against equality. Which limitations would we impose in the name of fairness? And how much inequality would we be ready to tolerate among us in the name of individual liberties?

Frankly, we haven't found a definitive answer yet. What has become clear after many rounds of discussions and some fiery debates, is that any means should always be valued from a pragmatic point of view - and never become a goal for its own sake. In other words, there are many good reasons to found a collective or to work anonymously, but not all of them work for everybody - and in some cases, a collective or anonymous authorship might just not be the right choice for you.

We think that historical and contemporary examples in arts and politics[7] show that collective authorship (and, conversely, individual anonymity) works best when there is a justified urgency to protect the real identities of group members, be it out of very practical reasons such as fear of political retaliation or social stigma, and / or to send out a strong political message. Internal reasons inherent to group dynamics (as mentioned before, fear of hierarchization and the issue of de-facto leadership come to mind) are also a factor to consider, and are often more important among activists and social movements, where traditional and digital media tend to favour the emergence of charismatic figures, who can trigger conflicts and fragmentation.

While we refuse the notion of avant-gardism in art and politics, we also think that the optimal results in cooperative environments are attained when the best aspects of grassroots activism, such as inclusiveness and the creative potential of the hive mind, are complemented by the strong organizational capacities of a small, strongly motivated group. However, for this symbiotic relationship to work, accountability and transparency are key.
If the core group loses the trust of the other members, the effects can be detrimental. This is also true for many contemporary movements, who rely heavily on digital tools to organize and coordinate themselves. In the worst case, social media administrators can act as "digital vanguards", using the considerable reach of the accounts they control to

present personal positions as if they were those of the entire movement. [8]

Fact is, digitalization is changing every aspect of our societies, and collective practices are no exception. Just a few decades ago, it would have been impossible for us to do what we did as a collective over the past years — for the very simple reason that there was no Internet. To be in the same place at the same time has been the exception for us, rather than the rule. What this taught us is that collaborating over great distances and over prolonged periods of time poses a whole new set of problems and challenges. As a consequence of the pandemic, millions of workers experienced this reality for the first time over the past few months. As a digital collective, we feel that we have been a laboratory in this sense, fuelling our desire to further investigate the challenges of our practice within the conflicted zone of creative labour, art and activism in the era of late capitalism.
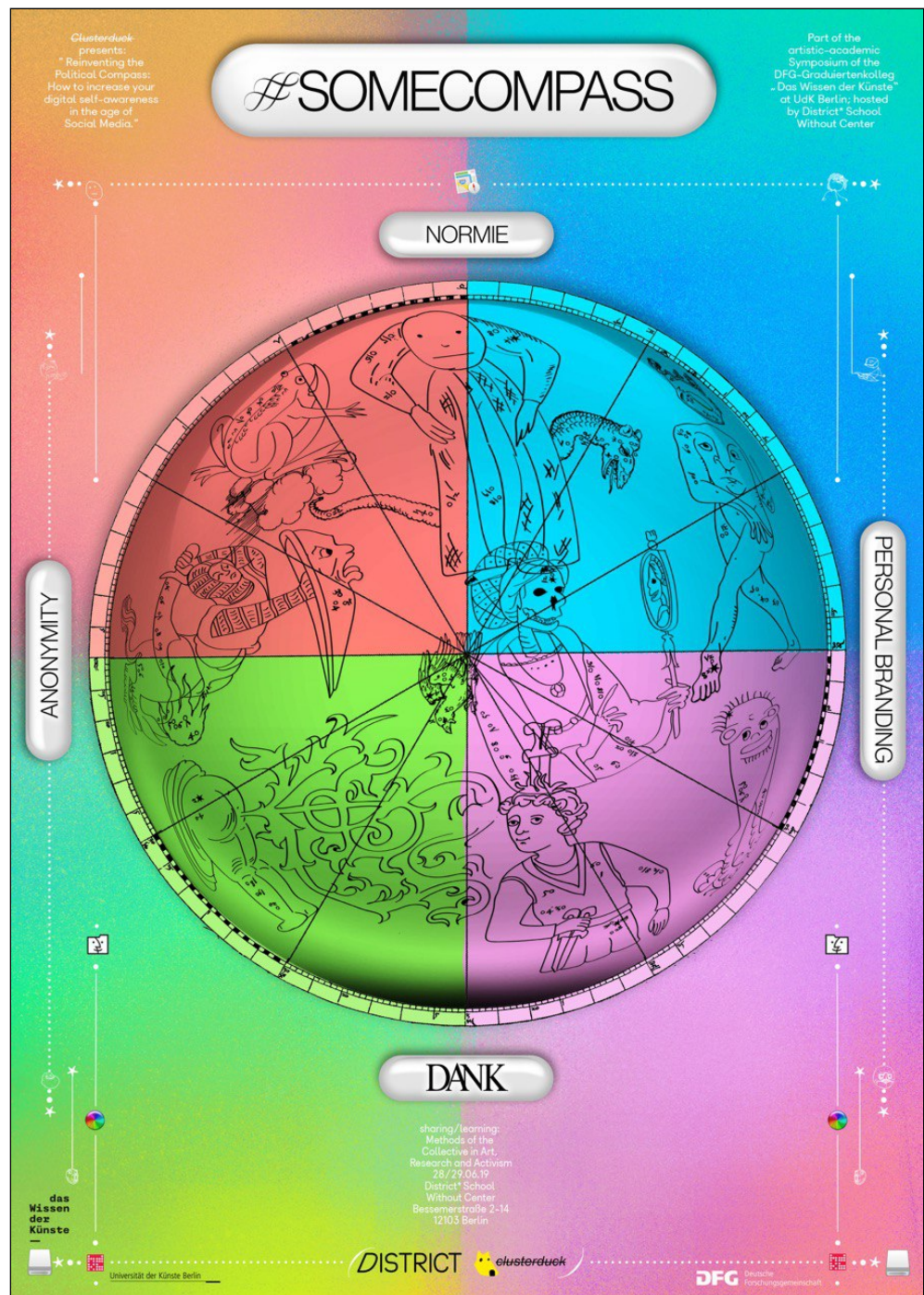
Fig. 3.
Poster announcing the workshop *Reinventing the Political Compass:
How to Increase Digital Self-Awareness in the Age of Social Media*
taking place at the symposium *sharing/learning: methods of the
collective in research, art and activism*, 2019
Design: Clusterduck Collective

1   Basciano, Oliver: "Artists assemble! How collectives took over the art world", in *The Guardian*, 10 Dec 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/dec/10/artists-assemble-how-collectives-took-over-the-art-world

2   You can find us at https://clusterduck.space

3   Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge 2008.

4   Groys 2008, p. 3f.

5   For more impressions of and context about our project #MEMEPROPAGANDA see also: Transcription of the Round Table *assembling/disseminating* in this issue.

6   Srnicek, Nick and Williams, Alex: *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World Without Work: Folk Politics and the Left* , London 2015.

7   We can think in historical terms, but also of recent examples: crucially, the explosion on the global stage of feminism, decolonization and the civil rights movement have shown the potential of collective practices for minorities usually not included in the mainstream (white, male-dominated) art world. Many of the groups that emerged in this period have been gaining late recognition from the establishment over the past years, with articles, books and retrospectives celebrating their heritage, for example the feminist collective Guerrilla Girls or the African American movement AfriCOBRA, which can be often seen as a model for contemporary artistic collectives, and rightfully so. Racism, misogyny and homophobia remain strong drivers towards collective organization, as we can confirm from our own experience as a group with a majority of female, queer and gay members.

8   Gerbaudo, Paolo: "Social media teams as digital vanguards: the question of leadership in the management of key Facebook and Twitter accounts of Occupy Wall Street, Indignados and UK Uncut", in *Information Communication & Society, 20* (2), 2017, p. 185-202. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1161817