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Art Quilt Makers and Their Critique Groups

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This study investigated nine critique groups formed by fiber artists who define themselves as art quilt makers. Information from two questionnaires and from published articles was supplemented with telephone interviews. The research focused on the balance between support and criticism. Other issues addressed were decision making and leadership, the format and procedure of meetings, the perceived benefits of membership, and activities undertaken as a group. The responses were analyzed and compared to research on both small group dynamics and the creative process. While many of the quiltmakers in these groups had experienced rigorous, demanding critiques as part of their formal education, they did not wish to repeat that experience. Instead they expressed a strong preference for a positive and supportive atmosphere, in agreement with psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers's theory that an atmosphere of psychological safety, psychological freedom, and empathic understanding is necessary to promote creativity. In such a climate, fiber artists whose work involves originality, risk, and technical innovation find an informed and responsive audience.

My interest in critique groups is an outgrowth of my own experiences in art school, where I found monthly critiques to be stressful, sometimes painful, but supremely motivating. After completing graduate school in 1988, I came to miss that intense period of time when peers and instructors focused entirely on my current work.[1] I also missed the stimulation and energy of seeing what different people were doing. Several other fiber artists felt the same way,

and we became a critique group, meeting once a month to discuss our work. We often discussed the possible value of becoming more rigorous in our criticism of each other's work.

In addition, as I interviewed quiltmakers for profiles in quilt publications, several of those artists stressed the importance of their critique groups. [2] Thus, memories of academic critiques, the evolution of my own group, and comments of quilters whom I interviewed led me to analyze these groups. I define the focus of these quiltmakers as innovative textile compositions that have some ref-

Figure 1. *The Red Square* © New Image, 1997, 56" H x 56" W. This piece was initiated by Carol Hemphill Gersen. Each square contains a single piece of red cloth which was hand dyed by Carol. Other fabrics are cotton, blends, linen, rayon, and silks. It is the most recent in a series of collaborative quilts by New Image. Photograph by Norman Watkins.

erence to the traditional concept of quilt (see figure 1). Some artists use dyes, ink, and paint; elaborate machine quilting, embellishment, photo transfer, or screen printing. Others use seemingly traditional materials and techniques; that is, commercial fabric and hand quilting, and they work within the familiar block and/or grid format to develop their own distinctive expression. Some make garments, some do embroidery. Styles range from geometric to whimsical, from abstract to representational (see figure 2). Most importantly, these people define themselves as contemporary, or art, or studio quiltmakers.

Methodology

I began my research by sending a list of questions to one person from each group, and they returned the answers with alacrity, immediate evidence of the value of the groups (see appendix 1). I found strong similarities and some differences among the groups, and mutual interest in the subject. Some of my questions proved to be irrelevant, and others produced more reaction than I had expected. A second list of questions was more focused. The questions pertained to leadership and decision making, the format of the meeting, group activities, and particularly the offering and receiving of criticism (see appendix 2). For the purpose of this study, I have identified each group by the town or city where it meets, unless the group has chosen an official name.

Group Descriptions

The seven members of the **Newton**, Massachusetts, group have been meeting since at least 1986, when the first members responded to a suggestion from Judy Becker. They usually meet every three weeks, in the evening at Judy's home in Newton. [3]

The five members of the **Weston,** Massachusetts, group began meeting in the early 1980s at the suggestion of Rhoda Cohen. They meet once a month in the evening, usually at her studio in Weston, sometimes at other homes.[4]

The six members of the **Wrentham**, Massachusetts, group be-

Figure 2. *In The Market* © New Image, 1991, 54" H x 70" W. A colored photograph of a German fruit market, taken by Sue Pierce, was cut into fifteen rectangles, each to be interpreted in the technique and style typical of the artist. The techniques include both hand and machine applique, piecing, and quilting; beading, embroidery, fabric crayons, painting, photo transfer, and stamping. The piece was proposed by Dorothy Holden. Photograph by Michele Vernon.

gan meeting in 1991. They currently meet once a month in the evening at Rosemary Hoffenberg's studio in Wrentham.[5]

The members of the **Greenwich**, Connecticut, group are Marguerite Malwitz, Niki Bonnett, and Florence Sverig. Marge proposed the group sometime in the early 1990s, and they meet about once a month during the day, rotating meetings at each other's studios.

The ten members of **The Capital District Art Quilt Network** were brought together by Anita Rabinoff-Goldman, who organized the group in 1993. They meet in the evening, every six to eight weeks, rotating between the members' homes and Anita's studio in the greater Albany, New York, area.[6]

The thirteen members of the **New Image Group,** founded in 1980, meet monthly in the Washington, DC, area. Three members take turns acting as hostess to limit confusion about locations. They define themselves as a support group, rather than a critique group.[7]

The twenty-four members of **FACET** began meeting in 1987. They hold monthly evening meetings in Evanston, Illinois.[8]

Through my correspondence with Ann Fahl, I learned of a newer and much larger group with a slightly different focus. The **Professional Art Quilters Alliance (PAQA)** meets on the campus of the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.[9] It has ninety members, and meets once a month, beginning at 10:00 a.m. PAQA provides a "showcase" rather than a critique, that is, an informed audience for complete works, rather than comments on work-in-progress.

A ninth group of three members which met on **Long Island** disbanded between the first and second questionnaires. Not all the members were able to maintain a commitment to the priorities of the group.[10]

Definition of a Group

Social scientists list several factors that determine whether an assortment of individuals truly is a group. According to psychologist A. Paul Hare, "The group must have a set of *values* to give meaning to its activity, a set of *norms* that specify the role relationships between members, some form of *leadership* to carry out specific tasks, and some means of providing *resources* that are needed to reach the group's goal."[11] This paper will demonstrate how quiltmakers' critique groups fit these criteria.

Decision Making

Each group in this study, with the exception of PAQA and sometimes New Image, makes its decisions by consensus, a method which women find comfortable. Social scientist Marvin Shaw found, "women more often than men adopt an anticompetitve norm and attempt to operate so that everyone will benefit."[12] Research shows

that the consensus method is usually used by a group of members who have a feeling of affection for each other and above all it involves agreement on common values. It is a powerful method of decision making, but it can also require a great deal of time.[13]

When the question is a simple one, for instance whether to invite an outsider to a meeting, any one negative opinion will prevent that happening. In more complicated situations, such as planning for a group show, questions must be discussed thoroughly so that each person has an opportunity to voice her opinion. In the Greenwich group one member noted, "I think we all have to feel o.k. about a decision to make it a go. This came up when we did a group show and needed to work together on aspects of it."[14] Members of the Wrentham group realized they were more honest in talking one on one than they were in the group meeting, where no one wanted to be the negative voice.[15] It is essential that each person has an equal opportunity to speak, although she may choose not to use her time.

While it is accepted wisdom that any group has a leader, acknowledged or not, these critique groups all made a conscious decision not to have a permanent leader. (It might be more accurate to say that no member wanted to be that leader.) Indeed, there was more agreement on this question than on any other. Members of the Weston group did report they especially value suggestions from Rhoda Cohen, and they wonder what her response would have been when she does not attend the meeting.[16] In the Capitol District Art Quilt Network, Anita Rabinoff-Goldman sends out meeting announcements, keeps records for the group, and has suggested group projects and discussion topics. PAQA will choose a treasurer and a newsletter editor in 1997.

While decisions about serving refreshments may seem trivial, they are one of the first and most obvious ways in which the group exercises its values, norms, leadership, and resources. The usual reasons given for not serving refreshments are that it takes energy and time away from the real purpose of the group, and that eating together causes the meeting to become more social. If members travel some distance for a lengthy meeting, however, it is reasonable to bring a lunch, as the Greenwich group and New Image do; each hostess also serves coffee and pastry when the members ar-

rive. The Weston group serves coffee and something prepared by the hostess, but the Wrentham group has decided: "We do not bring food to our crit for two reasons. First food and quilts do not mix. Secondly, food also tends to make it a more 'social' gathering. We want to stay focused."[17] The Newton group limits refreshments to coffee that the members serve themselves: "It is one less womanly chore!"[18]

The PAQA group is able to use the Du Page campus food service. A member noted that "One of the best parts of this group is that after the meeting we all go to the huge college cafeteria and have lunch together. This is when real networking is accomplished. New friendships develop there."[19]

Group Size

The size of the groups ranged from three members in the Greenwich group to twenty-four members in FACET (with twelve to fifteen present at the meetings), and then to the ninety members in PAQA. Marvin Shaw described the effects of larger group membership:

> The range of abilities, knowledges, and skills that are available to the group increases with increasing group size, as well as the sheer number of "hands" that are available for acquiring and processing information. The advantages of these added resources for problem solving are obvious. The larger group also provides a greater opportunity to meet interesting and attractive others with whom interaction may be rewarding. For shy persons, the larger group provides greater anonymity and so may be more attractive to them. On the other hand, as group size increases, organizational problems become difficult. The potential number of interpersonal relationships between group members increases rapidly with size; subgroups are more likely to form in larger groups, and the potential for conflict is correspondingly greater.[20]

Certainly there is less opportunity for each person to play a vital role in a large group, but that may be appealing to some people. The advantages and disadvantages of large and small groups will vary according to the task that the group is trying to accomplish.

Shaw suggested that the optimum group size is five persons. If the group is smaller than that it is likely to dissolve when the first person leaves the group, as happened to the Long Island group that was originally included in this study. The three-member Greenwich group has continued because of the very strong commitment of each member to her work.

The most common reason for someone leaving a group is because of family relocation. Full-time employment, often to pay children's college tuition bills, may be too demanding to permit active membership, although many critique group members work full-time, or hold several part-time jobs. Ann Fahl left the FACET group for PAQA meetings because a daytime meeting was more compatible with her family situation.

Sylvia Einstein of Belmont, Massachusetts, belongs to both the Weston and Newton groups, which is an unusual circumstance. She finds them very different, with the Newton group more "nuts and bolts" oriented, and the Weston group more interested in analysis. "I couldn't give up either one," she says. Although she brings the same quilts to each group, the reactions are sometimes totally different. Sylvia does not discuss one group with the other, but she sometimes serves as a liaison between them. She is also meeting temporarily with a group of emerging artists who have founded a new group.[21] All the members of these critique groups belong to the Quilter's Connection, a large (250 members) and well-established guild that meets in Arlington, Massachusetts.

Qualities of Creative People

Some of the traits associated with creative people include high ego strength, a strong need for independence and autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-direction. Researcher Frank Barron found creative people often had "a liking for abstract thinking and a special interest in the kind of 'wagering' that involves pitting oneself against the unknown, so long as one's own effort can be the deciding factor," as well as "a liking for order, method and exactness, together with excited interest in the challenge presented by contradictions, exceptions, and apparent disorder."[22]

Benefits of Critique Group Membership

For people with such high expectations to invest energy into the maintenance of a group, they must receive something that is perceived to be beneficial to both their own self-image and to the progress and promotion of their work. Niki Bonnett of the Greenwich group described the immediacy of that benefit:

> The greatest thing about our monthly meetings is the burst of inspiration that comes from being in another artist's studio. The raw energy of a work in progress. A great quote scribbled on a scrap of paper. The mention of a hitherto unknown artist or author. An unexpected combination of colors pinned to the wall. I always rush home with some enticing new idea buzzing around in my mind just waiting to be considered more closely and expanded upon.[23]

Women who are balancing the needs of children with the demands of paid employment and their own strong desire for creative activity often feel that their critique group is the only place where they feel like themselves, rather than existing to meet someone else's needs. When the Newton group began, four of the five members were working and raising families. The critique time was and still is too valuable to be squandered in sociability.[24] There are few women with young children in these groups now; most of the artists in this study have raised their families.

People who work by themselves all day usually come to feel isolated. Then the anxiety inherent in the creative process increases the sense of isolation. Psychotherapist Carl Rogers wrote, "I do not believe that many significantly creative products are formed without the feeling, 'I am alone. No one has ever done just this before. I have ventured into territory where no one has been. Perhaps I am foolish, or wrong, or lost, or abnormal.'"[25] Receiving support and affirmation from other artists with similar interests is like finding water in the desert. Although many members of these groups also participate in more social or traditional groups, they find a vital audience in their critique group. Membership in the group also insures enough feedback on one's work so that family members are not pressured into making well-meaning but less than satisfactory comments.[26]

Members who join the group for those reasons are attempting

to meet their own psychological needs for affirmation, support, and helpful criticism. The networking aspect of the meetings is valuable for their professional development, as they share information about slide duplication, postcard suppliers, and art consultants as well as venues for teaching and publishing.

Group Projects

Group projects include "challenges" and collaborative quilts. Challenges typically are design exercises or the use of a new technique or material. The Capital District Art Quilt Network has done a number of challenges, including: choose an artist and create a piece in her/his style; design a small self-portrait doll; create a small "fetish" for exchange within the group; and bring a small, unfinished unresolved design for exchange. Notes on the last exercise mentioned, "These were passed to another worker each month for about four months til we felt they were complete. Good design exercise. Reworking a piece very different from your own was 'mind-stretching.'"[27]

A member of the Wrentham group challenged the others to compose a small fabric composition based on a newspaper photograph with no finished seams, only raw edges. Another challenge, proposed by Jean Fujio who uses the technique in garment making, was to make a pieced strip using the Afghanistani "flying geese" technique. In the Wrentham group, challenges are often resisted for several meetings, and then become a source of pleasure when the "Eureka" or "Aha" moment occurs and the artist can enjoy her awareness of the creative process during a short-term project.

PAQA challenged members to created a "statement" quilt, with a deadline of six months. The subject matter ranged from comical to serious, from "What's for dinner?" to the Holocaust.

Some groups do collaborative work. The New Image group has created ten quilts together, with varying degrees of success according to their own judgment (see figure 3).[28] Their best known effort, *Never Done,* featured images of ironing boards and was accepted into the Quilt National exhibit in Athens, Ohio (see figure 4). Some of their quilts are composed of discrete blocks that are eventually

assembled, and others are progressive pieces that are passed from one member to the next.

Birthday quilts are another type of group undertaking. The Newton group has established a tradition of making a progressive quilt for each member's fiftieth birthday. The first person pieces fabrics together and passes that raw material, so to speak, on to the next. Each participant decides how to add, alter, or embellish as a personal contribution, depending upon her position in the order of work. After the group ceremonially presents the quilt to the recipient, each person can see the complete quilt for the first time and explain the part for which she was responsible.[29]

These progressive or collaborative quilts differ from the group quilts often prepared by traditional guilds. After a theme has been chosen, each person works in her own style and with her own interpretation of the imagery.

Group Shows

The most demanding cooperative activity is planning a group show. It requires artists who have joined a group to meet their individual needs to give attention and energy to a group goal. Decision making becomes much more complicated. Planning usually involves meetings with a curator or gallery manager, and someone must write publicity. People with specific responsibilities need to keep the membership informed of their activities. Just putting together a mailing list can be a strain on the relationships within a relatively new group. Making plans for the show takes time away from the consideration of new work, although most groups are adamant about not wanting to schedule extra meetings.

Group shows are exciting and rewarding, nevertheless. The Greenwich group had a show, "Fiber Collage Quilts: 3 Artists' Insights" at the Bruce S. Kershner Gallery in the Fairfield Public Library in the spring of 1996. The Wrentham group showed "Pieced Impressions" at the Sarah Doyle Gallery at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, in October 1995. The Weston group had a group show at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, Massachusetts, in 1991 which included work by then-member Danae Kouretas. The Capital District Art Quilt Network exhibited "The

Figure 3. *Textures* © New Image, 1994, 36" H x 54" W. The materials used in this piece go beyond the expected cottons, blends, and silk to wire, feathers, batting, fabric trims, yarn, velvet, and net. It was proposed by Michele Vernon, who specified that it be limited to black and white. Photograph by Michele Vernon.

Quilt as Fine Art" at the Albany Center Galleries in the autumn of 1995. New Image members have exhibited as a group since 1982, in addition to showing their collaborative quilts. The group even has its own New Image resume. The most recent exhibit of the New Image group was held at the Rockville Mansion Gallery in Rockville, Maryland, during the summer of 1996. That show included two new collaborative works.

Format of Meetings

Most groups have seen a format evolve that includes some personal conversation followed by art-related business such as show entries and recent exhibits, followed by presentation of members' work, which is the longest and most important aspect of the meeting. Writing for *Art/Quilt Magazine,* Ann Fahl described FACET meetings:

Figure 4. *Never Done* © New Image, 1994, 72" H x 54" W. These eighteen squares are not attached to each other, and may be rearranged in any order. Acrylic paint, cyanotype, embroidery, photo dye and photo transfer techniques were used in addition to applique, piecing, and quilting. The grid format and repeated image are traditional devices that serve to unifiy the varied styles. The piece was proposed by Dominie Nash. Photograph by Michele Vernon.

> After some initial chitchat, the structured portion of the FACET meeting begins. A portion of time at every meeting is devoted to 'brags.' We go around the room and each person has a few moments to tell what has happened in their professional life since the last meeting. Things such as the sale of a quilt, a show acceptance, or book and magazine exposure are all important bits of news. Brag time eventually becomes a networking session, as we share professional information, opportunities for exhibition, and discuss new books and products. Most helpful is when a member finds a new source of thread or fabric, where we can purchase supplies at a good price.
>
> When the business, brags and ideas are fully discussed, we move on to the critique portion of the evening. Each quilt has time devoted solely to viewing and discussion of it. The maker starts by giving a few details about the quilt, and the floor is opened up to comments and discussion.[30]

The Weston group tends toward a more intellectual and aesthetic approach, reading from a novel, perhaps showing photographs taken during travel, or discussing issues in the art world, such as funding for the NEA.[31] One meeting began with a discussion of *Women's Work; the first 20,000 years,* by Elizabeth Wayland Barber. A salon atmosphere is established before the discussion of work begins.

It is energizing and stimulating to have work by each person on display throughout the meeting, but few meeting spaces have enough wall space for this. If the hostess has work already on the wall she is a logical person to begin. After that a sort of Quaker "sense of the meeting" prevails, with other members speaking when they feel ready. This procedure is sometimes "a little chaotic" in the New Image group.[32]

The Wrentham group became concerned about the amount of casual conversation that was extending the length of the meetings so it established a rotating system of facilitators, proceeding in alphabetical order. The facilitator for the night is responsible for keeping the discussion on subject, and invites the next person to show work.[33] PAQA also uses a facilitator who volunteers, sometimes "at gun point," to decide in which part of the room the showing of work will begin.[34]

In all but the smallest and largest groups the members sit as nearly as possible in a circle, an arrangement which is compatible with the conditions of having no formal leader, and making deci-

sions by consensus. In the Greenwich group the three members sit in front of the work wall where they display their quilts. PAQA members, with a much larger group, sit in rows before a small stage. After their work is shown and discussed they place the quilts on tables around the edge of the room for closer examination after the formal meeting. Open communication between all members, however, is more important than seating arrangements.[35]

Offering and Receiving Criticism

These critique groups differ from critiques in the academic setting of an art school where the instructor is the primary source of authority, and also the source of a grade. Students are inevitably competing for grades and for the approval of the instructor, although they may be supportive outside the critique atmosphere. Most of the members of these art quilt critique groups had art training in college, (in fact, a considerable number are or were art teachers themselves, from the elementary to college level), or have taken continuing education classes. They are familiar with a formal academic critique situation although they do not want to duplicate it. Teachers give criticism because they are paid to do so; it is a part of their job. Within a critique group composed of peers, giving criticism is a more sensitive matter.

Many of the critique group members share memories of the time when in law school, architecture school, and, ironically, in art classes, male professors ignored or denigrated their women students. Nancy Halpern remembered being told to go home and build a doll house.[36] Barbara Crane remembered an instructor literally ripping a woman student's work to pieces, asking her if it was "that time of the month." [37] With no desire to repeat such experiences, contemporary quiltmakers still seek informed reactions to their work; indeed, that is the primary reason for belonging to such a group.

As I studied the reactions to my questions, I began to doubt my original assumption that the most rigorous criticism would result in greater productivity and more innovative work. PAQA, for example, *began* with the idea that it would not be a critical group. Ann Fahl said:

> We have a showcase where members show a recent work and talk about it. The floor is open for discussion. This was set-up purposefully because the founding members believed that critique could be negative and destructive to members creative progress. Our philosophy is positive and supportive toward all members; personal growth is encouraged. The term "critique" means to criticize. This alone has a *strong* negative connotation. Along with this comes the tearing down or destruction of the fragile ego of the artist that created the quilt. Nothing positive will ever be gained through critical comments.[38]

I turned to the renowned psychologist Carl Rogers, who lists psychological safety and psychological freedom as the requisites for an environment in which creativity will flourish. Psychological safety includes accepting the other person as of unconditional worth. Rogers stated:

> The effect on the individual as he apprehends this attitude is to sense a climate of safety. He gradually learns that he can be whatever he is, without sham or facade, since he seems to be regarded as of worth no matter what he does. Hence he has less need of rigidity, can discover what it means to be himself, can try to actualize himself in new and spontaneous ways. He is, in other words, moving toward creativity." [39]

The next process is providing a climate in which external evaluation is absent. Rogers continued:

> For the individual to find himself in an atmosphere where he is not being evaluated, not being measured by some external standard, is enormously freeing. Evaluation is always a threat, always creates a need for defensiveness, always means that some portion of experience must be denied to awareness.[40]

An artist who anticipates harsh criticism will second-guess each decision, trying to avoid the negative comments that exist only in her imagination. Ann Fahl agreed that supportive comments are more conducive to growth. She stressed:

> Positive statements and encouraging words about the strong attributes of a quilt will build the self esteem and confidence of the artist/creator. This is how we grow as artists and individuals. As we take a small step forward, trying something new, experimenting, if we're encouraged

by others we will have the confidence to take the next step, and then another and another.[41]

Learning How to Offer Criticism

It may be necessary for people who wish to increase their effectiveness in the group to consciously monitor their own behavior. Shaw found that "the socially sensitive group member is more effective than the less sensitive member. It is at least theoretically possible for an individual to deliberately attend to the moods, feelings, and emotions of others and therefore become more sensitive to them."[42]

It takes time and experience to develop the ability to give helpful criticism in a constructive, nonjudgmental way. "I think it is important to take a cue from the person's presentation," Barbara Crane said, "whether they state they are very happy with a piece, or are wondering if more work is justified." She appreciates that members of the Newton group feel free to show work that is not serious or a major opus.[43]

Judy Becker, also of the Newton group, described how the group reacts to work that seems lacking: "We would start out by being quiet and seeing where the work is going for a time. We all need some experimental failures to grow or change direction. Then we might comment on older work we liked better or we might offer suggestions on directions the new work might take."[44] Marge Malwitz said, "We are very gentle with each other and encourage each other but do not go heavy." Commenting on her own response to criticism, she realized, "Usually if I honestly ponder what's been said about my work I can come to the point of using the advice or going my own route to the design problem. I have done both."[45] Even premier quiltmaker Ruth McDowell, now writing a fourth book about her unique methods, reached for her seam ripper after Rhoda Cohen demonstrated how a scrap of coral-colored fabric sparked a nearly complete and very large landscape quilt.[46]

The giving of criticism can be learned by listening to others who are more skilled, and by analyzing the comments which are helpful to oneself. If members of the group make an effort to look at another's work through the eyes of its creator, they will bring a

quality of empathic understanding to the discussion, which Rogers lists as the third characteristic of psychological safety. He demonstrated his knowledge of the creative process when he stated:

> if I understand you, empathically, see you and what you are feeling and doing from your point of view, enter your private world and see it as it appears to you–and still accept you– then this is safety indeed. In this climate you can permit your real self to emerge, and to express itself in varied and novel formings as it relates itself to the world. This is a basic fostering of creativity.[47]

Rogers believed psychological freedom results when an individual is permitted complete freedom of symbolic (not physical) expression:

> The permissiveness which is being described is not softness or indulgence or encouragement. It is permission to be *free,* which also means that one is responsible. The individual is as free to be afraid of a new venture as to be eager for it; free to bear the consequences of his mistakes as well as of his achievements. It is this type of freedom responsibly to be oneself which fosters the development of a secure locus of evaluation within oneself, and hence tends to bring about the inner conditions of constructive creativity.[48]

If one has reservations about a piece, or does not understand it, that is a personal reaction, not a global judgment about the worth of the person and their work. The creator is entitled to express herself in whatever way she feels is appropriate.

Level of Artistic Development

In order for optimal conditions to be realized, it is important that members of the group be equally committed to their work, and have reached a somewhat similar point in their artistic development.[49] If each person has found her voice and can verbalize what she is trying to do, there is less likelihood of any one person exerting undo influence on the group. [50] When this is not the case, Sylvia Einstein has found that less-experienced quiltmakers are better served by being in a group where others are also at an exploratory

and experimental stage. If too much energy is used in promoting harmony and cohesion among disparate members of the group, there will be less energy remaining for the fulfillment of individual professional and artistic goals.

Apart from the question of artistic development, however, the group will benefit greatly if the members possess a wide range of skills and experience. Shaw pointed out that "the more heterogeneous the group, the more likely the necessary abilities and information will be available and the more effective the group is likely to be."[51] There are times when talent for organizational tasks or the ability to defuse tense situations are appreciated as much as aesthetic judgment.

Lack of Production

None of the groups respond negatively to members who do not bring current work to the meeting. Those people contribute through their reactions to the others' work, and perhaps through information about books, shows, products, or classes taken. Judy Becker insisted, "We are there to share our ideas as well as our work, so no one should ever feel like a shirker."[52] The person who does not bring work to show may feel guilty for not producing, and is often under stress from family or health problems that preclude her doing creative work for a time. Patricia Autenrieth, speaking for the New Image group, stated:

> We have no set performance requirements. And most of us are very self-motivated to produce. However, there are some who are less so and who sometimes frustrate the others enough to occasionally raise the issue of performance requirements. But we always end up agreeing that differing levels of performance, ambition, etc. are valid."[53]

If the member is going through a dry spell she is "treated with sympathy and cautious encouragement," according to Nancy Halpern. This stage is painful for an artist who wants to be productive. Judy Becker says, "you're allowed to be dry. We talk about strategies to overcome inertia." Sometimes this is a transition stage between one series of pieces and the evolution of a new approach.

The reason for not having work may be pleasant. Marge Malwitz reported, "Many times one of us has traveled and then there is a wonderful sharing of places and inspirations and gathering of fabrics and found objects and design images in photos to share." Wrentham group member Marie Saulnier returned from a trip to Ireland with assorted spools of green thread from which each member could choose. Another member, Lynne Stewart, brought back tiny handmade lace motifs for each person from The Netherlands.

Presentation

Each individual must consider the question of when her work is ready to show. If technical problems are blocking progress on a piece, showing it to the group and asking for advice can be very useful. A garmentmaker may benefit from seeing the article worn by a different person. Sometimes "Have you tried rayon thread in the bobbin?" or "What happens if you give it a quarter turn to the right?" is enough to invigorate the creative process. Group members need to give some thought to when a piece is ready for public response. Showing the work before it has completely evolved may subject it to premature criticism that will interfere with its full realization. Peter London, an art therapist and professor of art education, noted:

> Ample time must be given to evaluation, but not at the beginning. When the enterprise has had sufficient time to run its course and display the mature phase of its potential, only then should the critical eye be cast.
>
> Every new creative enterprise–as it unfolds, probes unknown terrain and tests newly acquired strengths–is initially fragile. If the shadow of judgment falls too early and too heavily on barely emergent newness, it invariably finds it deficient. We must protect the emergent from the too-wise, too-informed eye of critical judgment. If not we risk squashing awkward but promising shoots before they can develop to maturity.[54]

The group may make its best contribution by simply listening to the quiltmaker as she explains what she hopes to do, understanding the risks involved.

Competitiveness

Many of the quiltmakers in these groups have international reputations for originality and technical innovation. They exhibit, publish, teach, and sell their work around the world. Within the supportiveness, there is surely an element of competition, but it was not evident in either the questionnaires or my interviews. Each group professed happiness for those members whose quilts were accepted into prestigious shows, and sympathy for those whose works were not chosen. Nancy Halpern mentioned the "lottery-like" nature of such shows. Like many of these artists, she has served as curator or juror for regional and international shows, and knows how many fine pieces of work must be rejected from any single exhibit.

Within the New Image group, "Members who are accepted into competitions that others were not accepted into do announce their success, though do not usually dwell on it out of sensitivity to those not accepted. If the unaccepted are upset, jealous, etc., they may talk about their feelings. We often speculate on the judges involved, compare decisions to other competitions, or share experiences on both rejection and acceptance." [55]

Perhaps because members of these groups have watched the creation of the accepted works, they take an almost maternal pride in their success. Judy Becker, herself a frequent Quilt National exhibitor, said, "We've all had our good and bad times and don't seem to feel resentful. It's loosened up in terms of being able to crow a little." In other words, sometimes it is easier to celebrate someone else's success than one's own.

Eric Maisal, a psychotherapist who specializes in matters unique to artists and performers, noted, "Although artists hunger for a large audience, it must be remembered that they are not creating for a crowd. They are creating first for themselves and then for another person like themselves, an artist alter ego, a like-minded witness, a person with whom exchanging work for praise is worth the effort."[56] He expressed very well the bond between members of these critique groups.

The diligence with which each person responded to my list of questions was mentioned earlier. The longevity of these groups is also telling; the Weston, Newton, FACET, and New Image groups

have been in existence for more than fifteen years, with a basically stable membership. Another indication of the high regard which members have for each other is their gift giving and the making of birthday quilts.

The art quilt makers critique groups that I studied are characterized by the absence of a formally chosen leader, decision making by consensus, similarity of goals and values, and the willingness to engage in collaborative activities. Their shared preference for positive reinforcement rather than negative criticism insures that each group will be an empathetic audience. The members understand the trials of inertia and isolation, and the likelihood of rejection in a creative arena where the work they have chosen to do involves risk, originality, and technical innovation. In that informed and affirming climate, they can serve as "like-minded witnesses" as each artist presents her work.

Notes and References

1. The Program in Artisanry at Boston University moved to the Swain School of Design in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and is now at the University of Massachusetts, North Dartmouth, campus.
2. Barbara Carow, "Ruth B. McDowell-Fine Art Quilts," *Art/Quilt Magazine* #3, 12-13,40, and "Nancy Halpern: I am Artist!" *Art/Quilt Magazine* #6, 10-12. A profile of Judy Becker is forthcoming.
3. Judy Becker, Linda Behar, Barbara Crane, Nancy Crasco, Sandra Donabed, Sylvia Einstein, and Carol Grotrian comprise the Newton group. Judy Becker answered the questionnaire.
4. The members of this group are Rhoda Cohen, Sylvia Einstein, Beatriz Grayson, Nancy Halpern, and Ruth McDowell. Nancy Halpern answered the questionnaire.
5. Barbara Carow, Jean Fujio, Rosemary Hoffenberg, Marie Saulnier, Louisa Smith, and Lynne Stewart are the members of this writer's critique group. Rosemary Hoffenberg answered the questionnaire.
6. Peg Foley, Kathryn Greenwold, Barbara Meilinger, Linda O'Connor, Jo Olf, Lori Lupe Pelish, Anita Rabinoff-Goldman, Diane Koflow Segal, Nancy Schlegel and Estelle Yarinsky comprise this group. Estelle answered the questionnaire.
7. Patricia Autenrieth, Barbara Bockman, Michele Duell, Carol Gersen, Pam Grammer, Lesly-Claire Greenberg, Dorothy Holden, Dominie Nash, Sue Pierce, Mary Ann Rush, Judy Spahn, Linda Tilton, and Michele Vernon are the members. Patricia Autenrieth answered the

questions and also wrote "Collaborating with New Image Group: a Personal Critique" in *Art/Quilt Magazine*, Issue # 6, 20-23.

8. Bonnie Benson, Cindy Carroll, Ellen Anne Eddy, Ann Fahl, Caryl Bryer Fallert, Cathy Grafton, Lucy Johns, Marjorie E. Johnson, Marcia Karlin, Donna J. Katz, Pat Kroth, Judy Zoelzer Levine, Linda LoBianco, Karen Maguire, Ann Pastucha, Judith H. Perry, Ruth Reynolds, Jane A. Sassaman, Mary Stori, Bonnie Peterson Tucker, Justine Vaughn, Judy Anne Walter, Ann Wasserman, and Kathy Weaver were the members when Ann Fahl wrote "FACET: An Invitational Fiber Artists Group," *Art/Quilt Magazine* #2, 24-25.
9. Barb Albrecht, Maureen Bardusk, Melody Johnson and Laura Wasilowski originated PAQA, and Ann Fahl answered the questionnaire.
10. The members of this group were Judy Hartman, Judith Herwitz, and Dorothy Lazara. Judy Hartman answered the questionnaire.
11. A. Paul Hare, *Creativity in Small Groups* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982), 20.
12. Marvin E. Shaw, *Group Dynamics: the Psychology of Small Group Behavior,* 3rd edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 183.
13. Hare, 174.
14. Marguerite Malwitz, response to questionnaire.
15. Rosemary Hoffenberg, response to questionnaire.
16. Nancy Halpern, response to questionnaire.
17. Hoffenberg, questionnaire.
18. Barbara Crane, telephone interview by author, 4 December 1996.
19. Ann Fahl, response to questionnaire.
20. Shaw, 169.
21. Sylvia Einstein, telephone interview by author, 4 December 1996.
22. Frank Barron, *Creative Person and Creative Process* (New York: Holt Reinhart & Winston, 1969), 102.
23. Niki Bonnett, "My Thoughts on Our Group," n.d.
24. Judy Becker, response to questionnaire.
25. Carl R. Rogers, "Toward a Theory of Creativity," in *Creativity and Its Cultivation*, ed. Harold H. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 77.
26. Eric Maisal, *Fearless Creating* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 210.
27. Estelle Yarinsky, response to questionnaire.
28. Autenrieth, Issue #6, 20-23.
29. Crane, telephone interview.
30. Fahl, Issue #2, 24-25.
31. Bonnie Jernigan, "A Creative Partnership," *Fiberarts* 19, No. 3, 48-51.
32. Autenrieth, response to questionnaire.
33. Hoffenberg, questionnaire.
34. Fahl, questionnaire.
35. Shaw, 151.

36. Nancy Halpern, telephone interview for *Art/Quilt Magazine*, 19 September 1995.
37. Barbara Crane, telephone interview, 4 December 1996.
38. Fahl, questionnaire.
39. Rogers, 79.
40. Ibid.
41. Fahl, questionnaire.
42. Shaw, 440.
43. Ibid.
44. Becker, questionnaire.
45. Malwitz, questionnaire
46. Class at Quilters Gathering, Westford, Massachusetts, 10 November 1996.
47. Rogers, 80.
48. Ibid.
49. Einstein, telephone interview.
50. Crane, telephone interview.
51. Shaw, 238.
52. Becker, questionnaire.
53. Authenrieth, questionnaire.
54. Peter London, *No More Secondhand Art; Awakening the Artist Within* (Boston: Shambala, 1989), 60.
55. Autenrieth, questionnaire.
56. Maisal, 216.

APPENDIX 1

For an article or paper, I would appreciate receiving information about the functioning and benefits of critique groups for contemporary quilt-makers. I would appreciate the names of the people in your critique group, with an address and telephone number for one person who is willing to answer any follow-up questions.

1. How did the group begin?
2. How often do you meet?
3. Where do you meet?
4. Are outsiders ever invited to your meetings?
5. Do you bring food?
6. Does the group have a name?
7. How many people in your group have had formal art education beyond high school?
8. Does your group have a leader?
9. Have you ever had a group show?

10. How are the group dynamics balanced between supportiveness and challenge?
11. How do you relate to members who are going through "dry spells"?
12. How do you prevent the group from becoming predominantly social?
13. Do any of your members belong to other small quilt groups that are different in character?
14. Why have people dropped out of the group?
15. Do you meet in the summer?
16. Personal comments describing how the group has influenced your work
17. Has your group ever made a group quilt? If so, is there a slide available?
18. Have articles been published about your group? Could I have the citation?
19. Does your group have "challenges"? What is the procedure?

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 2

Thank you for responding to my first questions.
These pertain to the actual conduct of your meeting.

1. Is someone designated to facilitate the meeting? How is that person chosen?
2. How do you determine the order in which people speak?
3. What is your seating arrangement? Please draw a sketch of the table and chairs as they are usually arranged.
4. Is current work on display thoughout the meeting, or do you only show it during your turn?

These are more psychological questions

5. If someone has not been able to produce any work since the last crit, how do they contribute to the meeting?
6. If several members have entered a competition, how do those who are accepted feel about giving the news to those who did not get it? Has that situation changed over a period of time?
7. If a member does not seem to be working to her potential, what are the ways in which the group seeks to communicate this?
8. If a group decision is necessary, is it reached through consensus or by voting?
9. When all members are participating in a group show, are the organizational details discussed during the crit, or at a different meeting?

Signature: _____ Date: _____