

Artistic Tension

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Melbourne, 1980. Amidst the post-punk arts scene that animated the city at that time, the artist-writer Philip Brophy reviewed, in the first issue of the small-run, photocopied magazine *New Music* published by the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, a video performance/screening by a local duo, Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli (known collectively as Randelli). I have never forgotten this line from the review: to the remark by Bendinelli that the collaborative process is “a continual fight ... we’re both either compromising or attacking each other’s throats,” Brophy responds: “But that’s good because it means that the object hasn’t got an artistic intention but it’s just got artistic tension.”¹ For what Brophy said there—deftly summing up an entire artistic and subcultural sensibility—was not an especially Romantic or Utopian view of the collaboration between two artists.

I myself—marked by the same moment in Melbourne arts culture—remain fairly hardnosed about the processes of creative and intellectual collaboration. Although, of course, I am not immune to the influence of those Romantic ideologies that we all grew up with, and indeed I have been involved with many efforts and experiments in a collaborative direction—including with Philip Brophy himself.

It seems to me that our default position as regards collaboration tends to be a dreamy one. We think about collaboration in the terms of—or even as a substitute for—the romantic or erotic fusion between two bodies, two minds, two souls: the merging of distinct sensibilities and styles into a

seamless whole. Or—a more defensible and certainly more modern goal—we aim for an overcoming of ego, getting beyond the separate, sovereign egos of artists, in the spirit of Australian artists Charles Green and Lyndell Brown, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, or the filmmaking duo Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.

I begin, rather, from the assumption that collaboration of that fused, seamless sort between two people is mighty difficult, and probably even impossible. Very few collaborative couples, in my experience, can literally paint every stroke or write every word of a work fully together, as if they are one and the same person—or even as a new, separate, jointly created third person. (One often reads, in accounts of collaboration, about the no less Romantic notion of the “third entity” created from the fusion of two others.) And I also begin from a related assumption: that, no matter our best intentions, the individual creative ego is hard to squash, and always has to be negotiated in any act of collaboration. Indeed, my focus here will be on collaboration gone wrong, gone bad.

This is a subject not often discussed, especially with any degree of frankness. An important exception can be found in Nikos Papastergiadis’s account of a specific collaborative project with two artists, Kathy Temin and Constanze Zikos (2004)—but there the theorist/critic tends to blame the artists involved for resisting the process he proposes, whereas I think the problems cut in all directions, in all ways, and raise some fundamental differences between the activities of critical theory and artistic practice.

Three Models

It is partly a problem of style. I tend to believe that a person’s stylistic signature in any medium cannot—whether they like it or not—be simply melted into somebody else’s. What collaboration usually is, in reality, is a compromise-formation, a negotiation, an arrangement—often what French aesthetic theory calls a *dispositif*, that is, a kind of machine, game or system that is set up and organised in advance of the creative act *per se*.² *Dispositif*-style collaboration works best, I believe, in the field of conceptual art, where so much is machine-like and predetermined by systems at the outset. But, even there, we must not rule out or overlook the personal aspect, the signature touch, the expressive aspect in anybody’s practice. There was always a discernible signature to the work of a Warhol or a Beuys, arising from the choices made about how to frame or present even the most seemingly impersonal artistic gesture. Nobody else would have stacked those famous Brillo boxes, for example, exactly as Andy did!

Let me jump from art practice to critical practice, and speak from per-

sonal experience. I have written critical texts in collaboration with quite a few other people, including the late Paul Taylor (who founded the magazine *Art & Text* in the early 1980s), the French film theorist Nicole Brenez, and the editorial collectives of several magazines that I've been involved with. I have also done image/text or design/text collaborations—which, as I have already flagged, is a still more complex “cross field” endeavour—with Sydney artist Mark Titmarsh, and more recently the Spanish Internet artist Vanessa Agudo, where my texts work with and around the artists' images and layout. But, in every case, there was an agreed-upon protocol (a working-method *dispositif*) that generated the shape and outcome of the collaboration.

I shall briefly sketch the options for collaborative work, as I see them, in three broad categories.

Option 1: The Back and Forth Method

Person A produces something (text or image or audio work) and gives it to Person B, who revises it, and gives it back to A to look over. The result may go back and forth several times, often (in my experience) with one of the two more in charge of the finished, deliverable form of the work. This is how, for instance, Guattari worked with Deleuze on their epic philosophical works together, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaux*: Guattari provided the (very) raw drafts or notes, and Deleuze worked them up into his own text.³ American artist and critic Patricia Patterson has described her writing collaborations with husband Manny Farber in this way:

Manny is willing to stay up all night long, take an hour's nap, and then do another rewrite, retype, collage. He's the workhorse of the pair of us; he does the typing. He will initiate many, many rewrites, come up with new tacks to explore when we're way beyond deadline and patience.⁴

When I wrote a text on the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder with Paul Taylor, this is exactly how it went: he asked me to write, then when he got my text he chopped bits out, rewrote other bits, put both our names on it, and published it.⁵

Option 2: The Montage Method

Very frequently used between two or more collaborators. It is agreed at the outset: Person A will do this bit, this piece, this corner, this layer; Person B will do another bit; then they will be combined within a structure that has already been more or less foreseen, foreshadowed. This is how collabora-

tions tend to work within the more codified realm of the sciences, in the technical writing up of laboratory research. In the arts, however, could we not say—trying to rescue a little Romanticism in the face of the conceptualist *dispositif*—that collaboration involves a major aspect of evolving, mutual influence, as in the Basquiat-Warhol painting collaborations? This is certainly how collaboration works in the absolutely exceptional case of improvisatory music ensembles—although the humblest rock band composing and arranging a new song on the spot is not necessarily so far from the more hallowed example of the Free Jazz band. But in all other areas of the arts it is going to go quite differently, giving rise to the pragmatic montage method. This leads to what I will call a *patchwork* aesthetic, very heterogeneous, bitsy and full of internal intervals—which is today, in the digital age, a more popular form than ever for collaborative work. The case of contemporary techno-musical collaboration through purely digital means (with the performers remaining in their separate spaces or nations) is a striking new case of this, as we hear, for example, in the work of Australian sound artist Pixieguts.⁶

An example of the Montage Method, again from my own writing archive. When I composed with Nicole Brenez a tribute to the great experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage straight after his death, we each wrote completely separate texts, without consulting each other.⁷ All that we determined at the outset is that the texts would have roughly the same number of paragraphs. Then we spliced the two texts together mechanically, in the following order: Nicole’s first paragraph—my first paragraph—Nicole’s second paragraph—my second paragraph. The result was surprisingly, magically smooth; even our respective best friends, in Paris and Melbourne, could not tell who had written which bit of the article, and indeed even I—in a rare moment of “third entity” rapture—now have trouble remembering what parts of it are mine. However, any effect of fusion here came strictly from the *dispositif* chosen, not any Romance of creative writing.

Option 3: The Interlocutor Method

In the case of writing, it goes like this: one talks, and the other inscribes. Not *transcribes*, because it is not dictation—rather more like translation, the rephrasing of something a little wild or tentative into something more definite and formed. I wrote a piece called “The Archaeology of Culture” (1982) with Philip Brophy this way, with him speaking and me writing; we were scarcely 21 years old at the time.⁸

This method, as you might imagine, takes a large amount of mutual trust, because it is easy for a whiff of betrayal to enter the works: are the

words of Speaking Person A being respected, included, are they being stolen by Writing Person B who has the power over the form and style of the text? A fascinating, positive example of this—where the writer exists in a mainly subservient relation to the speaker—is the books by Italian artist Gianfranco Baruchello and his writer-accomplice Henry Martin, such as *How to Imagine* and *Why Duchamp* (both 1985), which are among the greatest and most beautiful books I know.⁹ And a gruesome, negative example is the “life and lies” of Bertolt Brecht in relation to all those collaborators (usually female) that he leaned on and ruthlessly exploited, according to the research by John Fuegi.¹⁰

Collaboration, in truth, is difficult, and it is fraught—or, it certainly can be, and this is the cheery message that I bring you in this reflection. As Chris Fujiwara muses in his illuminating discussion “The Third Voice”: “ambiguity seems to be the direction in which collaboration inherently tends”¹¹—by which he means not the ambiguity of the finished work (although sometimes that, too), but the ambiguity of the personal relationships underpinning the making of it. Or it *becomes* ambiguous only after (even long after) the act of creative collaboration, when other sorts of interpersonal ties (marriage, business partnership, art collective, etcetera) begin to unravel. The history of artistic and intellectual collaboration is full of painful, failed collaborations—collaborations that feel like a failure to those involved, even if the final work, to our eyes and ears, may appear to have come out perfectly fine and dandy.

Musical Example: John Cale and F(r)iends

One of the examples of fraught collaboration I often return to is musician John Cale’s absorbing autobiography, *What’s Welsh for Zen*—itself transcribed and assembled by Warhol Scene expert Victor Bockris, with a very funny and revealing 1998 television documentary showing them working, quite testily, on the book together.¹² (A literal third hand, designer Dave McKean, was brought in at a later moment for a radical revision, in graphic and pictorial terms, of the manuscript as a published text.) For a Cale fan like myself, the thought of his time in the early Velvet Underground, his album with Brian Eno (*Wrong Way Up*), or his two-hander with Lou Reed (*Songs for Drella*), leads to conjuring in one’s mind the superb fruits of collaboration. Then you read the autobiography and you find out that, for Cale at any rate, it was nothing of the sort.

Cale’s entire book is one long howl on the subject of bad collaboration, and it eventually becomes the prism through which he views every single aspect of his often disastrous personal life, as for instance when he judges

his failed marriages and relationships, or refers (in a mind-boggling passage) to “my mother as my first collaborator.”¹³ In terms of artistic work, each collaboration starts out well, always with Cale’s intense longing for a truly reciprocal exchange in lyric- and music-making. But then, at some dramatic point, it always hits the rocks—as a reader, you quickly come to anticipate this arc—with the other doing the dirty and taking the reins behind Cale’s back, or suddenly changing the terms of the collaboration, so that he (Cale) is in the Servant position, and the other becomes the despised Master. Of Lou Reed—the true shadow-nemesis of this life-story—Cale says: “Lou and I had one of those rapiers where you think the other guy is thinking what you’re thinking, but he’s not.”¹⁴

The details of collaboration derailment are different every time and the same every time in Cale’s account: in the studio, it is often a matter of who literally, physically, has power over the final mixing desk session, where the vocals go, and how the arrangements are mixed. Like Orson Welles in Hollywood, Cale often seems to find himself locked out of these decisive post-production work sessions. What starts out freely, in the joyous give-and-take of improvisation, composition, the laying down of diverse channels and tracks, gets fixed into a final form that he cannot recognise, that alienates him and makes him bitter forever—except that he keeps agreeing to collaborate again with the same people, in the hope that, next time, it will go better. On the second last page of the book, Cale is still raging, still perplexed about it all; he cries: “It is a matter of pride that the element of recognition in collaboration must be given gratis with no terms attached, or it undermines itself.”¹⁵ Cale is, thus, a Romantic on this point—a wounded Romantic.

Cinematic Case Study: Antonioni and Wenders

I begin with a point of personal irritation. If there is one cliché I never want to hear again in my life, it’s this: *film is a collaborative art*. Yes, of course, there are genuinely collaboratively made or collectively made films, especially in political and experimental cinema; and there are famous co-director teams who swap every role—tending (oddly enough) to be brothers, or indeed twin brothers: Coen brothers, Dardenne brothers, Polish brothers, Wachowski brothers, Quay brothers. But most often, a film as it is usually made, is absolutely *not* a collaborative artwork. Yes, many hands, many skills, many inputs make most films. But that is not collaboration in the sense in which I am exploring here. A film is usually, in its production method, a hierarchical pyramid with one person at the top, or a concentric circle with one person at the centre—and that person is the director. The di-

rector is she or he who always gets to choose, in the final instance, whether a wall is blue or green, whether the light is sharp or dim, whether the camera framing is tight or loose, whether the music gets punched in or not. That is what they are paid for, to make those decisions, what the great critic Victor Perkins calls the “moments of choice” that define every film director major or minor.¹⁶

Whether you love or hate the Romantic ideology of the *auteur* in film culture, it is a simple fact: the director calls the shots, and those calls, thousands upon thousands of them, more than anything else, form the distinctive style and tone and sensibility of a film, any film. Even the most seemingly impersonal, generic, pre-coded film has, somewhere in it, the unmistakable and inescapable trace of a personal style, one person’s style. If it does not have that trace of style, it is called television (because TV production is much closer to the traditional guild/studio/craft mode of art making).

In 1985, at the age of 73, the master Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni—who once famously said, “filming, for me, is living”¹⁷—suffered a debilitating stroke. It robbed him of much of his physical motor capacity, and created severe aphasia in his language skills: he effectively could no longer speak or write. At that point in his life, he had been a director for 42 years, and had made some 27 films. Amazingly, Antonioni would go on, almost all the way to his death in 2007, to make seven more films, of varying lengths, in his crippled and aphasic state. He was able to do so because of his wife Enrica, his assistant Andrea, and a very understanding producer, who all stuck by him and made these last seven films possible. But those are not the inter-subjective collaborations I will speak of today.

One of the final seven Antonioni films is a remarkable feature titled *Beyond the Clouds*, premiered in 1995. It is a star-studded movie that got financed because of everyone associated with it, and because it fit the market designation known, not too kindly, as a “Euro pudding”: meaning, it has multiple languages and nationalities and pretty pan-European locations; it features an awful lot of nudity and quite graphic sex; and it is an anthology or omnibus work, three short stories strung together and united by a framing story. Antonioni could not, literally, write the script for this movie, so his long time collaborator Tonino Guerra whipped it up from a suite of short stories Antonioni had written and published many years previously.

Antonioni could not speak or walk much, but he could see, point, draw, gesticulate, and utter a small number of words that functioned, asemantically, as noises or clues that only fuzzily indicated his directions, his moments of choice. He might exclaim *gira*, for instance—the Italian word for turn—but that could mean, on set, that the actors should turn, the camera should turn, the props should be turned—and it could also mean the exact

opposite, to stop turning. It was up to all those around him, every single time, to figure this out. To everything: turn, turn ... And Antonioni, never known as a warm director who encouraged his co-workers or discussed much with them, naturally withdrew further into himself, often in an inconsolable rage. But, all the same, seven films got made and at least three or four of them are terrific, including *Beyond the Clouds*.

There is little documentation or exploration of the work of artists, in any media, once they reach a stage of mental or physical deterioration or disability. But consider these cases in the medium of film. By the time Luis Buñuel made his final movies, he was almost completely deaf and blind. Catherine Breillat has made her last three feature films in the aftermath of a serious brain haemorrhage. Jacques Rivette shot his most recent film as Alzheimer's completely devoured him. And Jean-Daniel Pollet made his final films after most of his bones had been shattered in a train accident. In all cases, it is the team around the director that allows and ensures that the film will be executed and completed to the *auteur's* plan. And bear in mind that insurance—the ability to insure any production financially in a watertight way—is absolutely unavoidable in any even slightly conventional moviemaking situation. So an ailing director needs, on paper and in reality, a back-up director who can take over the reins if the worst happens.

Enter Wim Wenders, who was Antonioni's required back-up wing-man on *Beyond the Clouds*. We have a fascinating and rare record of the collaboration between Wenders and Antonioni—the diary that Wenders kept during almost every day of the production process, published in English as *My Time with Antonioni*. Near the end of this diary, Wenders returns obsessively to the terms of the contract he agreed to and signed: Antonioni was in charge of the three central stories and Wenders was in charge of the framing episodes, for which he devised, wrote, shot and edited thirty minutes of material—all designed to fit in and around Antonioni's material, blending into and resonating with it.

But Wenders comes to wonder, in some pain, what Antonioni's own, internal, uncommunicable understanding of this contract was. He might have seen an ominous clue in the moment when Antonioni drew a diagram consisting of three large boxes, and two small connecting lines. He pointed to the boxes and then himself; to the lines and then Wenders. In the penultimate, terrible incident of the book, we discover that Antonioni, in the editing room, went far beyond the terms of the legal contract, and cut almost all of Wenders's material from the finished film. (This material has never been seen publically, not even as a DVD extra.) In the final pages of the book, Wenders masochistically accepts this fate, while Antonioni, literally, shrugs his shoulders and shoots a "what else could I do?" look at his collaborator.

“I do not regret I accompanied Michelangelo through this time.”¹⁸ These are the closing words of Wenders’s account of the making of *Beyond the Clouds* but, by that point, it is clear that he in fact regrets it a great deal. From the first pages of the book, Wenders finds himself (despite his life-long admiration for the director’s works) very disapproving of Antonioni’s style and manner of doing things: he does not like the Master’s incessant use of the “ugly” zoom lens, his insistence on running two or three cameras at once, his violation of the codes of left-and-right screen direction for the actor’s entrances, exits and glances, and his general indifference to continuity from shot to shot. Where did the magic go? Wenders strains to discern it through the interpersonal tensions and confusions of the shoot.

It would be true, but also too simple, to say that what we witness here is the clash of two mighty egos belonging to two directors fully aware of their own status and stature within world cinema. Antonioni knew that he needed Wenders by his side in order to get the film made, but he clearly resented, from start to end, his partner’s presence and contribution to the project. In his disabled state, Antonioni was fighting to assert and maintain his artistic authority. Wenders sees all this, and can even joke about it as it unfolds before his eyes. But Wenders’s own position in this scenario is extremely difficult and complex. And here we can return to the diverse models of the collaborative relation and process outlined here and in other contributions to this issue of *Colloquy*.

In his mind, Wenders wildly oscillates between all the possible options of conceptualising collaboration. Is he Antonioni’s enabler, his assistant, his faithful servant—even his imitator, obliged to copy the Master’s style in his framing vignettes? Is he the interlocuter, the go-between, the translator? Is he just a minor hired gun, doing his own thing for his little corner of the canvas? All the way though, Wenders, like John Cale, keeps yearning for the fully-fledged, open, reciprocal exchange between two artists. But, as in many collaborative situations, the ambiguity installed at the outset as to respective roles and expectations doomed the happy course of this encounter.

Two Stories

I end with two anecdotes, one colourfully negative, the other strangely positive. The first is from Wenders’s diary. When Antonioni ends his part of the shooting schedule and Wenders begins his, the older man approaches the younger, making an odd but by that time familiar gesture: he pinches his finger and thumb together, and waves his arm up and down. Wenders interprets this gesture no less than five starkly different ways, on a sliding

scale from benevolence to terrorism: it could mean “good luck,” “your turn now,” “how’s it going?,” “don’t fuck up,” or “this better be good.” In this instance, artistic intention truly meets artistic tension.

The second anecdote concerns Antonioni’s final film, an exquisite short titled *The Gaze of Michelangelo* (aka *Michelangelo Eye-to-Eye*, 2004). In it, we watch Antonioni himself scrutinising, with evident aesthetic pleasure, the statue of David sculpted by another famous Michelangelo. It seems a simple piece, naïve even—until we realise that we are watching something a little spooky. Antonioni is walking around robustly, freely ... and that’s impossible, a miracle. In fact, this is a digital reconstruction, enhancement or prosthesis of Antonioni, his final fantasy of being the able-bodied, virile guy in the image that he no longer was in reality.

Michelangelo Antonioni may have had a hard time collaborating with Wim Wenders, but in his ultimate gesture as an artist he achieved the perfect collaboration—of his body with technology.

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NOTES

- 1 Philip Brophy and Maria Kozic, “Robert Randall and Frank Bendinelli,” *New Music* 1 (1980): 53.
- 2 See Adrian Martin, “Turn the Page: From Mise en scène to Dispositif,” *Screening the Past* 31 (August 2011), <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2011/07/turn-the-page-from-mise-en-scene-to-dispositif/>.
- 3 See Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus Papers* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006).
- 4 Richard Thompson, “Manny Farber: February 20, 1917 – August 17, 2008,” *Screening the Past* 23 (December 2008), <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/23/manny-farber-patricia-patterson.html>.
- 5 Adrian Martin and Paul Taylor, “Querelle,” *Tension* 1 (July-August 1983): 22-4.
- 6 See <http://pixieguts.com/>.
- 7 Nicole Brenez and Adrian Martin, “Serious Mothlight: For Stan Brakhage (1933-2003),” *Rouge* 1 (2003), <http://www.rouge.com.au/1/brakhage.html>.
- 8 Philip Brophy and Adrian Martin, “The Archaeology of Culture, or: How To Say Everything at Once,” *Cantrills Filmnotes* 37, no. 8 (April 1982): 44-52.
- 9 Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, *Why Duchamp: An Essay on Aesthetic Impact* (Kingston: McPherson & Company, 1985); Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin, *How to Imagine* (Kingston: McPherson & Company, 1985).

- 10 John Fuegi, *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht* (New York: Flamingo, 1995).
- 11 Chris Fujiwara, "The Third Voice," *Feed*. Accessed 17 March, 2000, http://www.feedmag.com/templates/default.php3?a_id=199&page_num=1.
- 12 John Cale and Victor Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); Dave Marsh, *John Cale: An Exploration of His Life and Music* (BBC, 1998).
- 13 Cale and Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 268.
- 14 Cale and Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 73.
- 15 Cale and Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 268.
- 16 V. F. Perkins, "Moments of Choice," *Rouge* 9 (2006), http://www.rouge.com.au/9/moments_choice.html.
- 17 This oft-cited phrase is a translation of the title of Antonioni's collected writings and interviews, *Fare un film per me è vivere* (Roma: Marsilio, 2009).
- 18 Wim Wenders, *My Time With Antonioni: The Diary of an Extraordinary Experience* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 183.