

# ON RECOGNISING COLLABORATION

*The proposition of this paper is that collaboration in artistic production is both a norm and an uncannily mysterious phenomenon. It is a norm that can be obscured from our awareness by a common belief in artistic individuality: the persistent insistence on recognition of individual authorship. Despite the pathologising narratives of genius provided by Freud, and the efforts of Barthes and Foucault in the late 1960s (which I do not intend to reprise here) to diffuse responsibility for art out into an unfinished historical and societal project, and more lately scepticism over essentialist thinking offered by post-modernism and deconstructive approaches (with Mary Orr's *Intertextuality* perhaps a summary work in this vein), the individual artist is still championed in criticism, publishing, journalism and marketing. This paper is constructed as a series of reflections and observations (taking inspiration from Michael Frayn's provocative 1974 work, *Constructions*, which itself owes a debt to Wittgenstein). The paper aims to define collaboration as a socio-political dynamic, one imbued with the ideals that Habermas identifies as enlightened. It offers a range of examples of collaboration in art and literature that might seem at first to have little to do with collaboration but aim to reveal the shifting, surprising nature of many collaborations.*

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1.

Collaboration is addictive. We could say it is natural too, and in any serious common human endeavour it has become inevitable. In art, the collaborative aspect of work—‘basically privatized but publicly relevant’ (Habermas 1989: 27)—expresses and clarifies the genuine experiences of people in a democratic, bourgeois world. It becomes a public exercise of private power, especially when its legitimacy is threatened. Perhaps there is no deeply private art that is not also a public working-with.

2.

Collaboration is a practice that, once we begin to look at it, appears various, and contradictory. I intend to discuss some of the ways it manifests in creative pursuits, touching on possible consequences, upon the spirit that infuses it, and also reflect upon some of my experiences of collaboration.

3.

Sometimes, when I am supervising a student through a thesis, as I pore over the paragraphs, sentences, and arrangement of chapters that the student has brought me, and we later discuss sources, sentence flow,

choices of words, meanings of terms, I am as much in thrall to the pleasure of working with another person towards a common end as I am focused on the achievement of the end. Working on a complex project with another person is, perhaps, in the context of a modern society, one of the deepest social pleasures of which we are capable.

#### 4.

We would not want to replace the word work with the word collaboration, because when collaboration happens through agreement and arrangement or even without the agreement of another (more on this in a moment), the work achieves a new and uncanny meaning as its location and its outcomes move outside of any single individual's responsibility. Collaboration celebrates that aspect of work that is a working-with. This is more particular, more nuanced and shifting in its meaning than the meaning we give to the word, 'work'.

#### 5.

I have come across an instance of collaboration in the past few weeks, only slowly recognising it as an instance of collaboration. I received a book in the mail from the New South Wales publisher Finlay Lloyd, *Crow Mellow*, written by Julian Davies. It is a novel with graphic illustrations on every page, drawn by Phil Day. It is not quite a graphic novel, but it is certainly a cross-art collaboration. It is also a collaboration with Aldous Huxley who, we know, died in 1963 after an amazingly various career as a writer, and not expecting that his 1921 novel, *Crome Yellow*, would become the template and driving intellectual and narrative force for a novel called *Crow Mellow* in 2014. *Crow Mellow* takes not only inspiration, but characters, ideas, structure and sometimes sentences from Huxley's book as it develops its odd simultaneously retrospective and contemporary collaborative project. Perhaps this exercise is validly recognised as collaboration (rather than annexation, influence, or derivation) because it is so openly respectful, inventive, irreverently authentic and thoughtful in its unfolding relationship with Huxley's work.

#### 6.

Diana Henderson begins her provocative contribution to Shakespeare scholarship, *Collaborations with the Past* (2012), by noting, 'The idea of collaboration lies at the heart of this book because it lies at the heart of the artistic process' (2). There are no isolated geniuses for Diana Henderson. Jeffrey Masten, also writing on Renaissance drama, introduced the term 'diachronic collaboration' (1997: introduction) to describe the tricky process of collaborating with the past. Is it possible Aldous Huxley had a feeling or an intuition that his novel was not quite completed, that it had social and historical tentacles into the future? It called, perhaps, for a future writer to take up its story in another register. After all, one of the characters in this novel does predict the emergence of the scenario of *Brave New World*, a novel to be written ten years in the future.

#### 7.

Nevertheless, to speak of collaborating with the dead does seem odd. Surely collaboration is a social experience based upon communication, upon give and take between participants where ego is put aside and negotiation begins to command a place. Would it not be more accurate to speak of intertextuality, inspiration, allusion, quotation, pastiche, homage, anything but collaboration when the 'collaborating' author is dead? Diachronic collaboration, I want to say here, is still possible, because of the nature of the literary text, which is always, in some sense, still unrolling before us in the present tense. A book's mute existence

as an object is transformed when someone picks it up and begins to read it. To read a text is to perform a text. The phenomenologist of reading, Georges Poulet, wrote: 'the extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you' (2001: 1321). But surely, you reiterate, when a writer collaborates with a dead author's text there is no active involvement, only a one-way conversation?

At the risk of broadening the idea of collaboration out to become almost synonymous with composition, I do think that there is a way for the reading writer to enter into a text and allow a text to enter into her so that collaboration can be the most accurate description of what has happened. Here, the relationship must be one of respect, of the kind of to-and-fro that comes from repeated re-reading, and a generous openness to that strange intermingling of self and text once one begins to read.

## 8.

I have come across another account of collaboration in the past few weeks, also only gradually recognising it as collaboration. The account is told over a couple of pages in Alberto Manguel's modern classic, *A History of Reading* (1996). At the age of 16, in 1964, Alberto realised he wanted to live among books, so he found a job at one of the three Anglo-German bookstores in Buenos Aires. Jorge Luis Borges, blind and accompanied by his 88-year-old mother, visited the shop and got into conversation with Alberto, eventually asking Alberto if he would come to his home and read to him, since his mother nowadays tired so easily. For two years Alberto Manguel read regularly to Borges in his sitting room. They read Kipling, Stevenson, Henry James, volumes of encyclopedias, Heine, the poet Marino and others. It was not easy to know who, in fact, was reading those books. Alberto Manguel writes of this experience:

Reading out loud to the blind old man was a curious experience because, even though I felt, with some effort, in control of the tone and pace of the reading, it was nevertheless Borges, the listener, who became the master of the text. I was the driver, but the landscape, the unfurling space, belonged to the one being driven, for whom there was no other responsibility than that of apprehending the country outside the windows. (1996: 19)

Borges would interrupt him when there was something that triggered an idea. For instance, once he was prompted to speculate aloud on a possible anthology of bad lines by famous authors, which included the last line of Milton's *Paradise Regained*, where Christ 'unobserv'd / Home to his Mother's house private return'd', and including a line from the 17th century playwright, John Webster, himself a writer who collaborated on scripts many times with other writers, and who managed to pen the following line in his play, *The Duchess of Malfi*: 'We are merely the star's tennis-balls.' If only Webster had been collaborating when he came up with that line, he might have been persuaded to keep it forever unseen by a public that would eventually include the unforgiving and all-seeing blind eye of Borges. Would any of these thoughts and imagined responses have been possible if anyone else but Manguel was reading those books to and with Borges? Who was in fact reading those books? Here, it is the curious vagueness of boundaries and responsibilities that are highlighted for at least one of the collaborators. They both gave themselves to their project. This generosity is the most endearing quality of collaborations that work.

## 9.

In both these instances of collaboration there is a relatively silent partner. Huxley was Finlay Lloyd's silent partner (though of course a whole novel is not an entirely silent contribution), and Borges was for the most part the silent partner of the collaborative reading with Manguel. In one instance the silent partner was the driver of the exercise, while in the other we could say the silent partner was not so much guide as

sounding-board. In both instances collaboration was shaped by what we might think of as the disability of one collaborator (Jorges' blindness; Huxley's bodily absence in death). One was interpersonal while the other was intertextual, we could say. But the exercise with Borges became its own source of text and the interpersonal element gave rise to a discussion of a possible new intertextual work. *Crow Mellow* aims not just to adopt or adapt Huxley's text, but to extend its life, test its life, and perhaps brings something of Huxley back into conversations about the meaning and usefulness of fiction.

## 10.

Many art projects do not announce themselves as collaborative, but they do seem to me to participate in its spirit, a spirit that places the work itself somewhere between those who have come together or been put together at its making. Musicians are familiar with this.

Recently in Melbourne, Arts House and Astra, two local arts organisations, staged a performance of Martin Friedel's composition for three grand pianos and a choir, *Dance of the Bee* (12 September 2015). In the program notes accompanying the performance, Martin Friedel writes:

*Dance of the Bee* is a creative collaboration between the composer/beekeeper and pianist Michael Kieran Harvey, drawing in three other pianists, and choral voices—and joined by a transparent beehive containing a small colony of bees ... The musical score of each movement contains much detailed composed material, but its realization leaves open space for the performers to improvise and vary their contributions to the resulting complexes of musical sound. (2015: n.pag.)

The bees provided a background drone in the scale of C to the whole 'white note' performance, their collaboration a defining element. You might think that this turns the idea of collaboration so far inside-out that it begins to lose its real sense, or you might find that this way of understanding collaboration opens up a new and larger sensibility for the artist, one where inter-species collaborations become possible.

## 11.

Art history remains uneasy with the collaborative nature of art. In its detailing of tradition and influence, developments of technique in response to technology, movements of thought, the influence and importance of philosophy, politics and theology on art, there is often the acknowledgement that art is embedded in community, in shared effort and shared ideas. But then there is the celebration of creative genius since at least the time of the enlightenment, perhaps beginning with Vasari.

## 12.

One of the most intense portraits among finalists for the 2014 Archibald Prize was Jude Rae's portrait in oil on linen of the actor Sarah Peirse. In commenting on the production of this work, Jude Rae said: 'Portrait sittings are onerous, but Sarah was patient and generous. We both felt it was a very rewarding collaboration' (Art Gallery of NSW 2014: n.pag.). This apparently humble comment by the artist was also an honest one because a portrait is usually a long and slow event that leads to the portrait as a record of an extended exchange between sitter and painter. Raphael's portrait, *Fornarina* (1518), would not be as powerful or as enigmatic as it is without the young woman's open-eyed gaze and the strong, direct challenge to her painter to find a way to express what seems both momentary and permanent in her character. Jude Rae and Sarah Peirse have managed to find a way for the viewer of the painting to understand the long shared moment of this portrait, an effect entirely different to a photograph. The sitter

is not a footnote. The collaboration in such works is not metaphoric, it is real. Either partner might not have risen to the occasion.

### 13.

But it would be a nonsense for the Archibald Prize to go to the best sitter. Though perhaps there is an element of this in the people's choices, where it is possible that judgments are more socially and emotionally complex and knowing, than they are for the appointed judges. It seems to me right, however, that the prize goes to the painter, because in most—if not all—collaborations there is one partner who takes greater responsibility for the decisions and the applications of skill that will complete the work. This only means that in the interests of understanding what we are appreciating, we must keep broadening our perceptions to include what lies beyond the individual artist's 'genius'.

### 14.

While each artist might seek distinctiveness in creative solutions—a unique expression—much of the time the main interest a work of art generates is in the manner of its interaction or collaboration with its milieu, that is its historical time, its aesthetic traditions, and its social contexts.

### 15.

In a short article on the scowl on the forehead of Michelangelo's 'David' (sculpted in 1503), David Summers makes the point that the statue acts as an illustration of the ways physique was understood to reflect character in the early sixteenth century. Young Neapolitan humanist, Pomponius Gauricus wrote in *De Sculptura* in 1504, shortly after Michelangelo's 'David' had been set in place, that physiognomy is 'a certain manner of observation by which we recognise from the signs of the body the qualities of the soul' (qtd in Summers 1978:113). Summers argues that, among other leonine characteristics, David's coarse and abundant hair, its growth extending remarkably low down on the back of his neck, and the cloudy brow all derive from lengthy textual descriptions of the way the physiognomy of the brave and manly man repeats aspects of the lion's physicality. At the time of Michelangelo's work on David, a translation of the ancient text, *Physiognomica*, was enjoying considerable popularity. It contained repeated descriptions of the body of the ideal man who showed the leonine bravery of his soul in his leonine physical stance. These descriptions, David Summers argues, can be read now as descriptions of the statue:

Signs of courage are coarse hair; an upright carriage ... The belly broad and flat; shoulder blades broad and well set apart ... a forehead not straight or lean, not large, and neither quite smooth nor yet a mass of wrinkles. (1978: 114-5)

Such descriptions are much repeated in the text and often linked to lions. David was known as the lion of Judah, and the lion itself was the symbol of the city of Florence, bringing a felicity to this inspiration and this humanist-republican expressiveness that would not have gone unnoticed at the time. The statue of David is in some of its aspects then a reverse-ekphrastic exercise, offering an illustration of those manly souls such texts were describing. This might be called influence or inspiration, but perhaps more fully it can be understood as the result of a process of collaboration. Ideas are exchanged, tested, re-defined, illustrated, and can emerge as a statement in a work of art that would not be possible without these multiple contributors.

**16.**

Towards the end of their study of Raphael in his contemporary world, Helen and Leopold Ettlinger note that, at the time he suddenly died in 1520, Raphael had charge of an extensive studio workshop with a team of artisans and painters working for him, producing and completing projects infused with his strict standards and aesthetic principles. His pupils tried for a time to continue in his absence, but could not produce work to match Raphael's once his guidance was gone (Ettlinger 1987: 230). What does this mean for an understanding of collaboration? Perhaps it indicates that no artist can avoid collaboration, but that the strongest and most deeply talented artists must hold to a particular vision, must communicate it, and must be given the role of making final and crucial decisions. In the account given by the Ettlingers, there is the suggestion that Raphael carried something like a charismatic influence upon others, bringing them with him as it were, to standards of work they could not achieve by themselves. Collaboration might be an expression of an enlightened spirit, but it is older than the enlightenment, and hierarchy is no stranger to it.

**17.**

I am working with a group of artists on a large project. The sculptor, Heather B Swann, has produced a number of black and white sculptures under the title 'Nervous', and she invited me as a poet to write some poems in response to the sculptures. She has also invited composers to produce music that might transform the poems into lyrics. She has invited singers to sing the songs that are written. She has a dramaturg and a director involved. The project will take another year to complete, and my work for it is almost done. The interesting part of this experience for me has been the division of expertise among artists who, nevertheless, are adapting to each other as they go. The final shape of the art event (or events) is at present unimaginable. I see my task as one of producing poems that I am pleased with, and that say something about or to the experience of being with the sculptures (I lived with some of them in my home for a time in order to write some of the poems), but then to release the poems into the project, knowing they will become in their turn a new kind of raw material out of which music and song might come. The important step for me was to see that Heather Swann is the one who must take charge of this project and guide it. At first we must have all the freedom we need to produce our own work as contributions to the project, but then if the project is to be coherent at the end, in its final expression, one person must shape that final expression, just as Raphael did apparently for his projects. I am waiting, curious to see what arises, and to see how much I feel personal ownership or group identity in relation to the final manifestation. It is a lot more exciting than sitting alone writing a poem that no more than a handful of people might ever read. It is difficult for me, nevertheless, to let the poems go into the project without my control over their fate and their final presentation.

**18.**

Acknowledgement of collaboration moves the artist from the private world of a private citizen (possibly too from the exclusive realms of dreams and neurosis) into that public space where freedom of thought, freedom of movement and association, so crucial to our ways of judging the degrees of civil justice, fairness and decency in a society, become relevant to the enterprise. Disturbance of our assumptions about individual genius, disturbance of norms, conventions, beliefs can paradoxically serve the purposes of social cohesion. Social cohesion must never become so secure and complacent that disturbance is ruled out.

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