



REVIEW

An Experiment in Collaboration

Jerwood Space
30 July – 31 August

Reviewed by: [Fay Nicolson](#)

‘An Experiment in Collaboration’ (according to the text within the show’s self-assembly catalogues) “is an exhibition and process-led discussion about art production within the context of collaborative art practice”. Six artists were asked to select practitioners, from any professional field, to work with for five months with the resulting exhibition presenting the outcomes of these collaborations. Some artists initiated partnerships with those working in related disciplines, such as architecture or fashion photography, whilst others embarked on more markedly inter-disciplinary collaborations, such as Jackson Webb’s project with biophysicist Dora Tang.

The exhibition promoted itself as an ‘experiment’ and, indeed, appropriated aspects of scientific language and methodology; from the equation on the press release and the flowchart on the flyers, to the catalogue’s pseudo-scientific *Draft Interim Report* submitted by writers Mark Dunhill and Tamiko O’Brien. This ruse, in some ways, echoes the translations of specialised language that have taken place across disparate practices during many of the exhibition’s collaborations, and begins to ask what knowledge and meaning is gained or lost through collaboration. Being an ‘experiment’, the exhibition placed more value on process over finished product. Claire Bishop, in ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, described this “laboratory paradigm” as “work that is open ended, interactive, and resistant to closure,” and concludes that “there are many problems with this idea, not least of which is the difficulty of discerning a work whose identity is wilfully unstable”.

‘An Experiment in Collaboration’ was a complex and reflexive exhibition, with works that were occasionally difficult and always “unstable”. However, as the project aimed to scrutinise collaborative practices, it was evidently aware of, and embraced, these tensions. So what did the works in this exhibition communicate about artistic collaboration, and what might be the benefits of opening up the guts of your practice to the hands and minds of others?

Gemma Anderson collaborated with forensic psychiatrist Dr Tim McNerny to create four portraits that explore the doctor-patient relationship. Their partnership arose out of a reciprocal interest in each other’s fields and a desire to explore imagery associated with mental illness. Within this collaboration Dr McNerny offered access to patients and information, whilst Anderson provided her intricate and highly developed skills of visual representation. In the disciplines of both art and psychiatry, this partnership appears to have been mutually beneficial. In the gallery, we have four beautiful pieces of artwork; in the hospital we have an artist engaging with people suffering from mental illness. In a discussion at Jerwood Space, Dr McNerny described the project’s positive impact upon a particular

patient, and how he and colleagues within the mental health sector had felt the collaboration had succeeded in addressing issues of inclusion and equality.

The ‘success’ of this particular project can perhaps be attributed to three defining factors within the collaboration: firstly, the way in which the artist chose to engage with her collaborator and his patients – the traditional, and thus accessible, art form of portraiture, which is able to retain its value and status across many contexts in ways some contemporary art does not. Secondly, the historically established association between art and the subconscious; and thirdly, art’s already proven efficacy as a form of therapy within various kinds of healthcare.

Writer Claire Bishop, again in ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, highlighted concern in the way ethics can detract from aesthetics in socially engaged art, and so we too must ask: has the positive reception Anderson’s portraits received from those associated with the field of psychiatry, detracted from or augmented their value as a works of art?

For Anderson and McInerney, a predetermined outcome and distinct roles culminated in a successful product, but I feel that this collaboration has failed in the way that both parties retained their habitual practices and identity throughout, seemingly without reappraisal. Was this a lost chance to embark on an unknown adventure that allowed for mistakes and unforeseen results?

The antithesis of Anderson’s contribution to the show was artistic duo Jackson Webb’s collaboration with Biophysicist Dora Tang. Working with “dialogue as a medium” the trio created de-authored drawings through a chemical process, whilst trying to negotiate the artistic and epistemological dilemmas of working between disciplines. At a gallery discussion, in reference to the display of their work, one of the two artists, Charlotte Webb, confessed, “I don’t think we really managed to resolve anything, and having the exhibition was the problem with the whole project”. In spite of her misgivings, I liked the minimal and understated presentation of records from their working process, a typed dialogue and a video, which in some way acted as a refusal to establish a forced conclusion; one that would inevitably attempt to rationalise the clash or cohesion of their separate methodologies, self-consciously so. Instead, the project raised interesting questions about the space between art and science, and whether this middle ground, after losing the specialised language, skills and knowledge associated with any discipline, is merely an area of lowest common denominators. The text also addresses notions of control and authorship, suggesting how the collaborator’s identities and working relationships shifted throughout the project.

Other pieces in the exhibition offered more succinct resolutions. Michael Pybus’ collaboration with *Dazed and Confused* was exactly what you would expect to see if an artist worked with a fashion magazine: a pouting model, leaning on a plinth, covered in paint. Within this collaboration, Pybus was interested in exploring “surface”, “display” and “glamour”. The vivid colours and geometrically patterned headwear resonate wildly on the photographic paper, and yet it seemed all too familiar. I wanted the photographs to move beyond the imposition of one surface (paint), upon another surface, (the model), to see something that challenges, rather than exaggerates, the lexicon of fashion advertising. The concerns of the exhibition force me to consider the working relationship between the artist and *Dazed and Confused*’s photographer and stylists. Are these images the result of Pybus’ intentions or the absorption of his practice into the foreign visual frameworks of pop culture and fashion photography?

Although the idea of an artist working with a computer game designer is exciting, I struggled with Daniel Baker's installation *The Glean of Glob*, (this may be the result of my dire gaming skills and short attention span). However, the collaboration does open up a debate on the structure and content of commercial computer games and how artists can utilise interactive technology.

Karen Tang's collaboration with architect Daniel Sanderson initially appeared to be an interesting dialogue that had been concisely resolved. Unfortunately, when given time, I found their sculptural installation, *Modern Molluscs*, conformed to expectations and perpetuated the clichés of functional and stylistic difference between art and architecture. My thoughts on the piece could be summed up in the following question: what do you get if you cross a male architect with a female sculptor? Answer: a modernist tower covered in brightly coloured, abject growths. The piece appeared as two elements superimposed upon one another, rather than a discussion (and possible deconstruction) of the roles and responsibilities upheld by artists and architects today.

The pieces in this exhibition suggest that trust may be an important element in determining how the outcomes of collaboration materialise. As an artist, how far can you trust another to handle your concepts, tools and materials, and how much should you expose your rationale?

Paul Richards' film, *On Second Thoughts, Eddie!*, made with a group of fellow artists offered another example of collaborative practice. Many of the artists in this group have worked together before and this is clear in the scenes that unfold. The piece is almost nothing more than a group of friends with a camera and is often in danger of verging into self-indulgence. Yet, the element of trust and mutual engagement apparent in this piece frees the project from the awkward reflexivity lingering in other collaborations. Scenes from the film are visually seductive (minimal movements in fluorescent leggings filmed in a wet underground room), moments disturb or arrest (a woman wearing a latex mask of her lover's face) whilst others are humorous and satirical, (soap opera-style emotional dialogue). This energetic merger of practices, in which their individual roles were changeable, offers a model of collaboration that many artists would want to adopt.

But, why should we, as artists, collaborate at all? What is to be gained or lost in shared authorship and multiple intentions? Linear development and the accumulation of a distinct set of concerns is a model asserted throughout an artist's education. In order to progress it can seem that every piece of work must strategically add to a cohesive oeuvre that re-enforces your commitment to a creative identity. Collaborating is a way of testing these concerns; of discussing, deconstructing or temporarily abandoning them. As the exhibition demonstrates, collaboration opens up access to facilities, knowledge and skills that the artist may not already possess, or are not readily available. But beyond this offer of convenience, collaborative projects are not always recognisably successful, and without the legitimisation of a curator and an institution, many of the art works in 'An Experiment in Collaboration' would compromise their meaning; underlining the responsibility of context in forming the identity of artwork. Despite this, I welcomed this difficult and unstable offering by Jerwood Space. It allowed an audience multiple interpretations of collaboration without being prescriptive or didactic, pointing to the tensions that occur around art's complex boundaries.

Writer detail:

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