Collaboration and Originality

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Most of us live in families, work and play in teams, form clubs and join societies with abandon. We collaborate. Many kinds of artists, too, work in groups as a matter of course, e.g. musicians, actors, dancers, filmmakers, architects. In fact it is almost exclusively in the visual arts that collaboration has recently–since the late 1960s–arisen as an issue. It may seem as though the discussion marks the overdue demise of an obsolete model of creativity that is most deeply entrenched in the visual arts. For although the notion of a self-sufficient genius, creating from his (or her) own inner resources, is by no means exclusive to visual art, the painter-in-the-studio may well remain that model's most familiar representation. In any case, I very much doubt whether the idea of individual creativity is being replaced by models of collaboration and interactivity any more than, say, print is being replaced by digital electronic communication. Digital technology is affecting everything about print, from who publishes to what and how much is published to how it all looks and who buys it and who reads it. In analogous fashion, collaborative models of creativity, in part because they seem implicit in these same technologies, are reconfiguring visual art. Rather than being replaced, however, the old model remains recognizable, operable as a kind of palimpsest, below the surface of a quite different aesthetic. In a recent anthology of writing about drawing, John Wood raised a question about whether a drawing could draw itself, whether it would be possible to think of ourselves being sketched by a drawing in an act of self-creation, or autopoesis that no longer recognizes a firm distinction between the drawer, the drawn, and the viewer. Drawing, as arguably the oldest, most immediate and intimate creative activity, is no doubt the best possible place to begin articulating such a framework. But the discussion moves to other media as well–language, for example, and music. It sketches us, the readers, as participants in a universe of constant creation, a dynamic interaction in which the origin of something new can't be traced to a single person, and perhaps can't be located in any one time and place at all.

It takes a certain courage to write as Wood does. For despite what has by now become quite a rich history of work–artistic collaborations, theoretical constructs–undertaken with deliberate intent to relocate the origin of innovation somewhere outside a single discreet consciousness, contemporary English resists such concepts. Wood's essay, unusually, frames the issue closely enough to give a reader the glimpse of how he or she might be ˜redrawn' in the context of different model of originality. The language seems to favour a neat reversal of the usual syntactic order: The drawing made him, • instead of He made the drawing. • But the thought is more accurately presented in more awkward terms, such as They, he and the drawing, remade themselves, • or if I may paraphrase Wood, The drawing, which includes him, draws itself. • I hope I am not distorting Wood's meaning unduly in reading the essay as a sensitive, close-up meditation on a key moment in Flusser's communicology, • a theory of human communication. The main thing I need to add to what Wood has proposed is that the moment of creation involves not only a human being and material stuff, but also other human beings, not necessarily present at the time. For media, including drawing materials, are storage sites. They are, further, invested with the energies of many. As the eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky once remarked, when you hand a child a rectangular sheet of smooth, white paper on which to draw, you're handing

her 400 years of art history.
Flusser describes communication as a peculiarly human artifice. Only through the generation, storage and distribution of information, he writes, are human beings able to make their lives meaningful and overcome their natural • condition of loneliness and inevitable death. In order to achieve this goal, a given person needs a fairly even balance between dialogue • and discourse. • Dialogue • here refers to an exchange of stored information that has the potential to create, that is, to generate genuinely new information (the kind of achievement he later refers to as art); Discourse • refers to the distribution of this information–critical to its preservation. At one time, paintings or sculptures or speeches were the means of discourse. In our own context, it takes television, radio, and print. When there is a radical imbalance between dialogue and discourse, as there is for most of those living in post-industrial societies today, a crisis arises, somewhat ironically, a sense of being unable to communicate. The problem is certainly not that there isn't enough communication. Of the common contemporary complaint about feeling isolated, Flusser writes:

"What people mean is obviously not that they suffer from a lack of communication. Never before in history has communication functioned so well, so intensively and extensively as it does today. What people mean is the difficulty in establishing a genuine dialogue, that is, in exchanging information in the interest of new information. And this difficulty can be traced back to just that communication that functions so perfectly today, namely that superb, omnipresent discourse that renders every dialogue at once impossible and unnecessary…When discourse prevails, as it does today, human beings feel lonely, even though they are in almost continual contact with so-called information sources. • If the village dialogue prevails, as it did before the communications revolution, people feel lonely despite dialogue because they feel detached from history."

In her justly celebrated study The Primacy of Drawing, Deanna Petherbridge found it difficult, if not impossible to construct a history of drawing, detached from the painting or sculpture or architecture it often serves. The essential frame • of drawing, comprising human hand, the material (graphite or ink or charcoal) and the supporting surface, has changed so little in such a very long time, she suggested, that a drawing made centuries ago can and often does look as fresh and surprising as a sketch made yesterday. Petherbridge defines drawing, that is, in much the same way Flusser defined a dialogue, • namely as an exchange of information in the interest of new information, a quite intimate exchange between the drawer's memory and the information structures, possibilities, limitations–inherent in a medium.

Drawing is rarely if ever the result of artistic collaboration. In fact drawing, as Petherbridge frames it, coincides historically with the idea of the individual gifted with the power to originate–the idea that autopoesis seeks to dislodge. A start date is certainly difficult to pinpoint, but one could do worse than to link the originary genius model to the introduction of print in the mid-15th century. Certainly medieval artists made drawings. A few survive. But before the advent of print, the making of images was undertaken not to distinguish an individual, but to articulate the narratives–biblical and historical–that made the world meaningful. God was in charge of origins, and the sense of satisfaction one might have felt in having accomplished a particularly fine carving or illumination was surely understood as a sign of His favour rather than a personal

achievement. Print, with all its attendant social and intellectual changes, relocated the site of origin to the gifted individual, validated his signature • in a radically more systematic and precise way than had ever been possible or desirable before. Through the keeping and distributing of records–of exhibitions and sales, engraved or etched reproductions, sometimes conversations and opinions, the idea of an individual as origin quickly became naturalized. Simultaneously a gap opened between the print-mediated persona, represented as originator • , and the actual experience of making something new, something more like a dialogue. Drawing remains the medium in which that kind of experience is most likely to have been stored. Drawing and print, then, emerge as complementary aspects of the same event. As if in reply to the first really powerful discursive medium, drawing absorbed the evidence of image-making as intimate dialogue. Other media were clearly used in the same way sometimes, but drawing has proved most effective in resisting the new powers of discourse, the link to history.

As long as artists could sustain a balance between working alone and participating in the historical discourse mediated through exhibition or print, the idea of the originary genius could go unchallenged. One thinks of the celebrated French Romantic painter Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) as an example, perhaps primarily because he left a journal rich in evidence of diverse and very stimulating dialogue. At dinner parties, theatrical and musical performances, exhibitions, Delacroix regularly met France's literary, political, scientific, social and artistic elite, informally exchanging views with them on topics of mutual interest. These were likely to include art. Many prominent politicians in mid-19th-century France had entered public life as art critics, honing their skills in political argument for an audience that understood image-making in terms of political discourse. A dialogue of such depth and diversity as Delacroix's perhaps does not render long hours working in heroic isolation in the studio less admirable, nor the resulting images any less deserving of their immediate and durable place in historical discourse. But it does raise a legitimate question about where Delacroix's work originated.
Delacroix's career was apparently not affected by the advent of photography. Unlike some of his colleagues, he was optimistic about its potential, if used to best advantage by ˜men of genius' • . He did not predict that photography would in time prove the single most effective force in dismantling the very idea of a man of genius. • For photogenic drawing • did confuse the issue of origin. • Unlike hand drawing, photography most definitely does have a history, in fact one that may be understood to trace the emigration of origin • out of the interstices of the exceptional mind and into a field of information exchange. New technologies, as one recent observer has pointed out, make it difficult not to collaborate.

Avant garde practice among visual artists particularly in Futurism and Dada drew models of collaboration from music, theatre and dance from the turn of the twentieth century. But it seems that collaboration was not discussed as a choice, a method or approach with quite specific opportunities and implications, until around 1970. At the time, the American sculptor Claes Oldenburg contrasted the artist in the studio • as rigid, violent and destructive (especially of self), and drunk or high (looking for sublimity), • with the artist in collaborative situation, • flexible, restrained, constructive, and sober (indifferent to sublimity, like airplane pilots) •
The list remains telling and provocative now, not least for its availability to other kinds of oppositions, such as infantile and mature, or masculine and feminine. But if artists ever really did

imagine themselves actually facing such a choice, they are unlikely to have done so for long. To an extent we may be able to answer Wood's question about being drawn • positively, and so think of creativity • in terms of flow of information that no one really possesses, the question can no longer be whether or not to collaborate. At most, it could be a decision to test and reshape one's own memory in conjunction with the information stored in a given medium, or to engage with another human memory and allow the resulting decisions to dictate the medium. There are good reasons for doing either–or both, as many artists do. And there are good reasons to think that it isn't precisely a choice in any case. One can not exactly go shopping for a way to make art. Some art is concerned with the possibilities and limitations of a single embodied consciousness. This is what determines its scope, and to a large extent its organization. To attempt to do such work collaboratively would be a kind of oxymoron. But many other kinds of practice and Oldenburg's long and very public engagement with sculptural scale clearly belongs in this category fairly asks to be shared. For such projects, collaboration means that the practice can be more ambitious, complex, diverse, possibly even more stable than would be possible for an artist working alone.

In addition to such tactical advantages, collaboration represents one way of bridging the worsening disjunction between dialogue and discourse. Artists who have established themselves as artists are invariably people who know dialogue • well. Able as they are to generate new information in exchange with a medium, they are no doubt more fortunate than those who, in the presence of powerful mass media discourses, are thrown back on dialogue at the level of local gossip. Still, the question of distribution persists. Without regular opportunities to exhibit or publish to preserve the achievement, the activity is closed-off in comparable manner. People feel lonely despite dialogue because they feel detached from history'. • Collaboration with other people potentially welds dialogue–the exchange that sparks something new–with something of discourse, for in a collaboration there will be at least one receiver, one reliable witness that something new has occurred.

But recent artistic collaborations also seem to articulate an aesthetic that values exchange and flow and this, I think, is the dimension that is genuinely new. For in this work neither the formal qualities of material nor the conceptual ambitions of its organization seem as significant as the dynamics of the particular relationships it mediates, whether these be between artists and work, work and viewers, or all of the above. The possibility that art might actually be about relationships was raised some time ago in the essay Mass Culture and the Visual Arts, • There, in the context of his now-famous suggestion that the avant-garde might actually function as the research and development arm of the culture industry, • Thomas Crow proposed that groups of avant garde artists, e.g. Futurists or Dadaists, had inadvertently modeled new kinds of group organization that were later important to the mainstream commercial structures, e.g. international corporations. This was surely very far from any Dadaist's intention. The exhibition or performance of a particular kind of relationship was not the specific intention of most of the collaborating teams that Charles Green analyzed for his study The Third Hand, either. But in tracing changing forms of collaboration through the 1970s, Green also suggests that the shift from collaboration as a strategy is relocating the meaning of the resulting work, to a deepening interest in relationship per se. The collaborative performance work of Marina Abramovicz and

Ulay, which concludes the book, also seem to be the most closely focused on the possibilities and limitations of a relationship between two specific embodied subjects. •
Critical Art Ensemble, a collaborating team formed more recently, make this interest quite explicit.

[Since it was formed in 1987] CAE has had a sustained interest in the variety of organizational possibilities from which artistic practice can emerge. Of particular interest have been the types of collectives that intersect artistic and activist practice. It is only through an understanding of this particular branch of sociology that the group believes it can refine and improve its own structure and dynamics, which makes thoughtful cultural production possible

With the possible exception of the later work of Ambramovicz and Ulay, successful collaborating teams seem to fastidiously respect, arguably even to nourish the boundaries of what used to be called the individual. • Even in rethinking individuals as embodied subjectivities, • in acknowledging cultural constructedness of subjects, these boundaries still matter. If anything the diversity of our experiences and memory become more precious than ever in the context of collaborative models of originality. For in such models, such gaps are exactly where something new can appear.

In the course of its intergalactic adventures, the crew of the Starship Enterprise occasionally encountered a cybernetic life form known as the Borg. The Borg are–or is–neither singular nor plural. Although they are recognizable bodies that move about and do things, they behave more like cells of a single animal than independent beings. As individuals, they have no convictions, no point of view. If one is sick or injured the relevant energies are reabsorbed into the hive-mind with no apparent regrets.

Within the fictional construct of the Star Trek, Borg are more highly evolved than humans. They don't waste their energies fighting. They don't compete. But they are repugnant and profoundly threatening because they do not make anything new. Instead of forging a history through dialogue and discourse as humans do, they parasitically absorb the cultures and technologies of other life forms.

If the crew of the Enterprise represents an idealized collaboration, the Borg articulate a fear that it all could go wrong. And if Star Trek as a whole perpetuates a great many untenable patriarchal and capitalist assumptions about the world, this one fear seems to resonate more deeply. The zeal for technically superb, efficient discourse could smooth out the oddities, peculiar histories and memories that make each human being unique. What would be lost then, it seems, is not riches or even power, but the peculiarly human capacity to make something new.

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2. Vilem Flusser (2003) Kommunikologie, Mannheim: Bollmann Verlag, 17-18. Translation mine.

3. Deanna Petherbridge (1991) The Primacy of Drawing:an Artist's View, London: The South Bank Centre. The Surealists' exquisite corpse drawing is the exception that proves the rule. The serial collage of contributions strain the idea of collaboration as an exchange of information.
4. EugÃ¨ne Delacroix (1951) The Journal of EugÃ¨ne Delacroix, Hubert Wellington, ed., Oxford: Phaidon. Cited in Aaron Sharf (1986) Art and Photography, New York: Penguin, 121.
5. Claes Oldenburg, in Maurice Tuchman (1971) Art and Technology, New York: Viking Press, 269. IN: Henry Sayre (1989) The Object of Performance, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 102.
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9. Paramount Pictures (2005) Aliens, • StarTrek.com, accessed 27 February