

CONSIDERING COLLABORATION

Entanglements of Two: A Series of Duets, eds. Karen Christopher and Mary Paterson (208pp, 2021, Bristol: Intellect, 9781789385045)

My own collaborative writing often relies on processes and forms. Whether writing in response to agreed themes and/or what has just been written by someone else, it involves trusting the other writer(s) but also trusting the work itself as it emerges – which is often not what is expected. Editing and shaping is of course a collaboration too, and collaborations which are simply about the juxtaposition of each other's discrete texts are as collaborative as texts where each author has written a line and passed the work to another.

There is little written about poetic collaboration. Robert Sheppard's essays about poetics (1999) are helpful because of his open and inclusive approach, as is his anthology of collaboratively-created imaginary authors, *Twitterers for a Lark* (2017) and what he has written about it on his *Pages* blog (and elsewhere). I have also found Dan Beachy-Quick's *Of Silence and Song* (2017) and Dean Young's *Recklessness* (2009) useful, but much of this is simply about the act of writing and not specifically collaboration. When I taught an Arvon course with Sheila E Murphy, she shared insights from the business world, where collaboration is considered in terms of productivity, team roles and social dynamics. I have been able to use some of this material when lecturing on collaborative project modules.

It is in the area of performance, however, where I have found the most material about the dynamics and process of, as well as reflection upon, collaboration. Karen Christopher and Mary Paterson's new book, *Entanglements of Two* (2021), joins a number of informative texts such as Matthew Goulish's *39 Microlectures* (2000), Tim Etchells' *Certain Fragments* (1999) and Twyla Tharp's *The Collaborative Habit* (2009). Goulish and Stephen Bottoms also edited *Small Acts of Repair* (2007), a book about Goat Island, the performance group which Christopher and Goulish were part of until its 2009 demise.

At first I felt excluded from this book. I do not regard myself as a performer (although I give poetry readings and university lectures) and my writing and visual art practices remain focussed on what is produced, my texts and paintings. I may (and do) reflect upon them and how I made them, but interviews, notes, academic and non-academic considerations exist to inform future work and perhaps give readers/viewers a 'helping hand' towards understanding. They are context not the work itself. Brief stories and asides at readings, book jacket blurbs and painting titles seem very different from lengthy artspeak labels on a gallery wall, explanatory introductions and prefaces, let alone complete publications.

Part of me wants to simply watch a performance, read a book, or look at the work. If something is not discernible in the work, does it exist as part of that work? Is this book just an exercise in explaining process, some might say

justification? But, of course, if we are interested we want to know more. And *Entanglements of Two* certainly offers more. There is lengthy and slow deliberation here, a reflective practice that seems at times to almost overtake the duets discussed, articulating what is otherwise unsaid.

Explorers traversing the Arctic and Antarctica often reported an extra person within their company. T.S. Eliot drew on this in 'The Waste Land':

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
(1963: 77)

Although there are also associations here with resurrection and ghostly presence, it might also be taken as a metaphor for the new products of collaboration where $1+1$ does not equal 2 but 3. Contributor Orit Kent discusses *havruta*, a Jewish way of studying where reading and learning is undertaken in pairs, creating and discussing meaning together; David Berman uses ideas from quantum physics to explore '[b]ringing together different phenomenon'; whilst Karen Christopher and Sophie Grodin declare that '[w]ith the other, thoughts and ideas travel to places where you could not go alone.' They go on to note that '[t]here is a struggle here between independence and interdependence.' (115)

Entanglements of Two works, like much performance work, by slow and considered associative thinking. Back and forth ideas go, page and eye, words and reader, meaning and mind, reflecting upon ten years of duet performances whilst also – as the back cover puts it – 'exploring the practical, philosophical, and aesthetic implications of working in pairs and offer[ing] wider reflections on the duet as a concept in artistic and social life'. The unit of two does not often always invite participation, it sometimes feels like a sealed unit, a couple. We cannot observe the duets, we have to (re)imagine the performances as we read the text. We are on our own: entanglements tie people together and exclude others; we have to choose how to untangle meaning for ourselves.

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So far I think this book is

A call to action.
A learning tool.
An analysis.
A footnote.

Smoke traces in the air, soon gone.

It is

A slow accumulation of knowledge and ideas.

An attack on all sides.

An elephant electrocuted in public for business purposes:
murder to discredit the competition.

(The elephant in the room.)*

It is analytical obsession, talk that makes my head spin. In a good way.

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Substitute 'book', 'writing' or 'poem' for 'duet' in the following quote: [T]he duet is a form of responsibility. [...] a duet generates its own forms of knowledge. [...] a duet is its own form of research.' (Mary Paterson, 185)

Rupert Loydell

NOTE

* The elephant, who is mentioned in *Entanglements of Two*, was called Topsy. She was electrocuted in 1903 and the event was filmed by Thomas Edison. The footage and information are available online.

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