

Reciprocal Good Will

There are numerous good reasons why the history of New Zealand art, like that of most Western countries, should be revised as a record of collaborations between artists. Photographers Alfred and Walter Burton (1866 – 1898), the Silverstream impressionist painters; Sydney Higgs, Kate Richmond, Nugent Welch and Marcus King (1906 – 1930), the ‘avant-garde’ Group in Christchurch (1927 - 1977), Gordon Walters and Theo Schoon, (1947 – 1950), Ralph Hotere and Bill Culbert (1984 – 1988), and more recently, Francis Upritchard and ceramicist Nicholas Brandon.

This will come as no surprise to anyone working professionally in the visual arts. Collaborations, whether consciously undertaken or not, are fundamental to the conception and realisation of a work of art. Australian academic, Peter Murphy’s consideration of the evolution of the painting and sculpture of American artist Jasper Johns maintains that the intrinsic nature of his, (and any artist’s work), represents the values, ideologies and socio-economic and political conditions of a particular period and time, substantiating; ‘that which is most emphatically individual, frequently bears the impression of the collective milieu, relationships and projects that populate the background experience of the working artist.’¹

If this current discussion by Murphy and an increasing number of academics about art as a reciprocated activity has gained currency in the past decade it has principally been driven by the impact and visibility of new technologies:

The past decade has seen a boom... in the form of production tools and... a malleable, non-regulated international arena through which artists operate independently from mainstream galleries and institutions. Perhaps most significant is the accelerated expansion and acclimatization to internet-based communication, file-sharing platforms and strategies, online networking, social media, gaming and virtual worlds.²

Essentially, digital technologies have broadened the potential number of outcomes for artists sharing complementary knowledge and skill to generate a single work. Yet, this notion of an amalgam of ideas and activities between artists is one that has been sustained for centuries in Western Art; reciprocal relationship where friendship is a guiding principle and means to generate good outcomes.

Former lecturer in Art History at the University of Oxford's History of Art Department, Katerina Reed-Tsocha maintains that:

Reciprocal good will [may be defined] as proactively wanting what is good for one's friend as a conception that entails an active and ongoing process of reciprocation....Defining the perfect friendship in terms of reciprocity of good will, Aristotle thought that *philia* (friendship) runs so deeply that it could be understood as a mutual exercise of virtues, leading to the development of practical wisdom...A form of ethical maturity expressed in both thought and action – but even further to an enhancement of life.³

Reed-Tsocha prioritises the significance of these underlying principles, referencing philosopher Jacques Derrida's reflections on Aristotle's definition of reciprocal good, asserting that 'there is no democracy without respect for the irreducible singularity...but there is [also] no democracy without the community of friends.'⁴

Of course, Edwards + Johann already knew that. Since 2007, Victoria Edwards and Ina Johann have collaborated as a distinct entity, cultivating a unique body of work as Edwards+ Johann. Anchored in the premise that artists sharing studio locations or spaces with one another on a daily basis, (comparing notes and ideas about their practice), Edwards + Johann extend the generosity of such a principle, collaborating and working on the same surfaces and objects, altering and manipulating materials, subjects and content.

As Edwards + Johann maintain, their work is different from the sum of its two previous entities. In 2017 it has become a ten year partnership and both admit that it has taken the necessary time for their work to come to represent a 'melding of voices.' How has this been realised?

Lots of communication over an extended period of time. There is this notion that as a serious artist you begin by having to plan out a career. Well, we literally leave that idea at the door. The timeframe we have worked together has generated our visual language and we have boiled it down to a language that is ours. The early years working together were experimental but we knew then that there was a 'newness' and a freshness to the way that we work together and that it is built on communication, trust and respect.⁵

Drawing, in the very broadest sense of the word, has been fundamental to their collaborations with attention given to drawing as an act of exploration and discovery across numerous media, materials and processes. Costume and performance involving the transformation of makeshift or found spaces and environments have been the basis for testing out and reviewing ideas and gathering information; documenting and videoing and photographing outcomes for an installation, or a new series of photographs and mixed-media collage works.

Edwards + Johann's practice is characterised by its consideration of the open-ended possibilities of all its subjects and contexts. This is also an approach to making work that they encourage others to share in their experience of it. *Like and Like 1 & Like and Like 2*, 2011 are curious and confronting portraits, initially comprehensible as the kinds of images of ancient mythical beasts that occupied the paintings and prints of artists like Francisco de Goya and Johann Heinrich Füssli.

Edwards + Johann, however, are not particularly concerned with any obvious homage to a history of Western Art. Rather, this association with the old masters is an invitation to contemplate an image that turns such assumptions back upon themselves, requiring a reconsideration of what and who is being represented in these uneasy, yet familiar images of mythical and fantastic creatures.

Edwards + Johann had begun to fine-tune this iconography in 2012, reducing their subjects to essential forms in expansive and indeterminate spaces. 'There was a presence in these works but it was not human. It was more universal and iconic, and this was an idea that developed, initially in *On the Seam of Things* in 2012 and then *Knight in the Wilderness* series in 2013/14.'⁶

These series recognised that the viewer was an active participant in the work. Acknowledging the nature of this relationship, visual riddles, promises, deceptions and ambiguities are taken as given. Yet, rather than simply wishing to puzzle or bewilder, Edwards + Johann sought to reposition broader perceptions about what is assumed, known or seen in our experiences of the world through an elusive visual language of myth and allegory.

Drawing upon their background as printmakers, painters, educators, performance artists and photographers, Edwards + Johann refined their impressive array of visual tricks. In *The Map is not the Territory*, 2013/14 and the *Constellation* series, 2014 –2016 the given premise of the materiality of geological specimens and landforms connects these images to the certainty of a known reality, and such an idea is reiterated in the formalism and order of the compositions that typified these works, indicating the sureness of rational decision making. Yet, the subjects themselves deny such logic or purposeful outcomes.

In 2014, Edwards + Johann installed *Knight in the Wilderness* series in the Christchurch Art Gallery's Outer Spaces venue in Tuam Street. Alluding to an imagined mediaeval era in English and European history, the reality in the experience of the installation and its work, however, resided primarily in an encounter with the richness of materials, textures, surfaces, forms and colours. At first glance, the

figures and costumes in *Knight in the Wilderness* possessed all the dignity and presence of a mythical period of European history. Yet, on closer inspection, this seemed entirely amiss.

It is not just the subjects or potential storylines of *Knight in the Wilderness* that are intriguing. Edwards + Johann's materials and working processes are also playing this game in the series, *On the Seam of Things – Constellations and Constellations – drawing strength*. Lines drawn over framed digital images seem to have escaped from beneath the glass surfaces, connecting the digital reality of its subject with the world of the gallery visitor, physically connecting the relationship between the viewer and the work and heightening the realities of these works and their visual trickery and challenges.

Yet, Edwards + Johann art also has its necessary measure and moments of assurance and principle. Essential to their practice is an iconography fashioned and delivered in considered, formalist images. The worlds that they create, and our experience of them, may be in chaos and open to question but Edwards + Johann anchor this universe with an economy of colour, form and line.

Secondly, Edwards + Johann's collaborative arts practice represents its own certainty of principles, a reciprocation of good will between two parties, one that leaves the idea of the artist working alone in their studio 'at the door,' making work that perfectly represents a 'form of ethical maturity expressed in both thought and action.' Edwards + Johann's art may be considering the stuff of myths and allegories but these are not the imaginings of children.

Dr. Warren Feeney

¹ Peter Murphy, Combination, Collaboration, and Creation. The Case of Jasper Johns, Sondra Bacharach, Jeremy Neil Booth, Siv B. Fjoerestad, [eds], *Collaborative Art in the Twenty-First Century*, New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/lib/canterbury/detail.action?docID=4524507>

² Sondra Bacharach, Jeremy Neil Booth, Siv B. Fjoerestad, 'Introduction. Collaborative Art in the Twenty-First Century, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/lib/canterbury/detail.action?docID=4524507>

³ Katerina Reed-Tsocha, 'Collective Action and the Reciprocity of Friendship,' *Collaborative Art in the Twenty-First Century*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com.ezproxy.canterbury.ac.nz/lib/canterbury/detail.action?docID=4524507>

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Interview with Edwards + Johann, 8th February 2017

⁶ *Ibid*