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An essay written for and published in a limited-edition book accompanying the exhibition *COLLABORATE!* at Oriel Sycharth Gallery, Wrexham Glyndwr University, between 23 April and 19 June 2015. The essay probes the idea that critics should maintain "impartiality" by avoiding collaborative interactions or professional conversations with individual artists.

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Rachel Withers (2015)

Why talk to artists?

Before starting on this script, I mentioned to a new acquaintance, a fellow academic, that I'd been asked to write a short text on some aspect of artists and collaboration. I got a response that I wasn't expecting. "Chanel and the Nazis, that kind of thing?" she asked. No, no, I gulped. My text needed to relate in some way to the widespread adoption of joint working practices or "distributed" authorship in contemporary art – with artists who explicitly work as couples or in teams or with specialists from other disciplines; or with "relational" projects that interpellate audiences as co-creators, and so on. Plus I'd need to flag at least some of the critical theories and arguments of the last fifty-odd years that have informed this tendency: the dismantling of notions of individual genius, the rejection of biographical criticism, the dethroning of authors as privileged interpreters of their own works, etcetera, etcetera. And somewhere in the mix, I'd probably also need to mention Roland Barthes's still-influential 1967 essay, *The Death of the Author*, since that text has done so much to free artists from the punishing, restrictive aspects of discourses of individual authenticity and authorial consistency, and to accommodate them to the idea that meaning in art is contingent, unstable, generated through the social process.

Confusion resolved, job done – but nevertheless, my new colleague's instant identification of collaboration's discreditable aspect unsettled me, because it needed lurking concerns of my own. I'd already decided to try and sketch some ideas about my own collaborations as a critic – research, writing, interviewing and conversations that I've been conducting, for a decade and more, with a number of artists in relation to their practices – and in regard to this I was niggling over a stricture laid down by New York Times co-chief art critic Roberta Smith in a Tate lecture in 2014¹. Critics (specifically, reviewers) should not talk to artists, Smith stated. In the context of her talk, her reasoning was clear. The prohibition had nothing to do with the theoretical turn away from humanist individualism, textual transparency and biographical critique sketched in the paragraph above (in fact, it ran against it – more on that later). It was straightforwardly about issues of independence and disinterest. Her implication was that hobnobbing with artists compromises one's critical judgment and inhibits one's scope to speak and write frankly. It could lead to dilute, toothless, congratulatory non-critique. At worst, it could smack of cronyism or financial motivation.

Smith's interdiction seems very steely and commonsensical, and it clearly works well for her. However, the art world would be an odd place if all critics followed it. One's first thought is that it ascribes to critics a level of power and responsibility that few – maybe none – actually enjoy. These days,

¹ See <http://www.aicauk.org/2014/10/13/aica-uk-annual-lecture-2014-announced-roberta-smith/>

critical coverage is largely a peripheral pursuit in relation to art world business; the time of the “make or break” review is long gone. Secondly, artist-critic dialogues proliferate in art writing; if the practice disappeared the field would be desperately impoverished. Thirdly, one can point to numerous sea-green-incorruptibles, critics doggedly opposed to the art market and its machinations, who nevertheless converse with and champion particular artists over the long term.

One of the most prominent and interesting examples of this is the dialogue between Benjamin H D Buchloh and Gerhard Richter. The art-critical equivalent of tectonic plates grinding and grumbling against one another, the Richter–Buchloh conversation has been underway since the early 1970s, and at the time of writing, Buchloh is billed as working on a sole-authored monograph on Richter. In relation to this, Buchloh has gone public on his particular difficulties digesting the (in his words) “manifest conservatism” of Richter’s body of family pictures (*Betty*, 1988, the world-famous painting of Richter’s daughter, is just one example). Convinced *a priori* of the intrinsically anti-reactionary character of Richter’s overarching thought and practice, Buchloh constructs his critical task as one of explaining how Richter’s family pictures, despite their apparent conservatism, negotiate “the complexity of being a contemporary painter without relapsing into earlier models [of representational or expressivist painting] and resuscitating them as though they were valid”².

The Richter–Buchloh conversation is clearly of immense critical value, not least because it prompts obvious, productive questions. Most pressingly, what is Buchloh, the trenchant opponent of liberal-humanist-biographical – “oeuvre” – criticism doing, when he resorts to a framing of his research and tactics of argumentation that seem so clearly embedded in strongly oeuvre-critical thinking? And given his critique of expressivism, how should we construe his foregrounding of the art-critically loaded terms “authenticity” and “honesty” in praising Richter? The point here, though, is not to twit Buchloh with inconsistency (to borrow C.D. Broad’s phrase), but to flag the sheer impossibility of thoroughgoing art-critical consistency. Why is it impossible? Not just because as embodied, time-bound, language-using social subjects we are all “in process”, but also because criticism’s readerliness must be acknowledged. Just like any other text, the critical text, an unreliable creative artifact, slips and slides.

The language of critics is no more transparent than that of any other writer: another reason why Smith’s hypothetical, nobly impartial, disinterested, trustworthy critic who eschews hanging out with artists is arguably an impossible abstraction. A risky one too, since it doesn’t help encourage a questioning, creative, shrewd attitude to the reading of the critical text. As the saying goes, you shouldn’t believe everything you read in the papers. Here, I’m reminded of an intriguing seminar I conducted with a bunch of

² See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhTB5jVRV_o

young curators a few years ago, in which I presented pieces I'd written on the artist Susan Hiller, and referred to ideas exchanged in the many conversations she and I had engaged in over a long period. The postgrads were suspicious: this relationship must surely mean my writing on her work must be partial and compromised, they objected. And yet they were largely accepting of, and quite relaxed about, the general idea of the "death of the author" and the "play of the text" in relation to the artistic texts (visual, spoken, written) and the creative writing that they dealt with as aspiring curators. Caveat lector, I suggested; the ideas in Barthes's axiomatic text are as applicable to critical writing as they are to other forms. The big surprise was how surprising the students found this. I suppose I was not exactly twitting them with inconsistency, but urging them to be consistent in their awareness and understanding of authorial instability and textual inconsistency.

"That the author can only be conceived of as a manifestation of the Absolute Subject, this is the root message of every authocide. One must, at base, be deeply *auteurist* to call for the Death of the Author", Sean Burke points out³. It's a great clarification, and it has consequences for some of the principles fuelling the "collaborative turn" in contemporary art. As already noted, ideas derived from deconstruction – the rejection of bourgeois individualism, authenticity, the idea of linguistic or expressive mastery, and so on – are important touchstones for a good many collaborative practices. However, these deconstructive discourses have already, in advance, dismantled the self-contained, self-originating, protean subject some collaborative practices explicitly or implicitly aim to oppose. Even the most private-seeming, "individualistic" type of cultural practice is "always already" a decentred operation: a negotiation between present and past selves and internalized others, inconsistent and conflicting patterns of thought, multiple learned languages, cultural forms and idioms drawn from innumerable experiences and encounters, plus addresses aimed at hypothesized audiences of many kinds. In short, working on your own is ("always already", as the saying goes) a weird process of collaboration: "*Je est un autre*" – I is someone else – in Rimbaud's indispensable phrase.

So, at the level of authorship, there seems to be contradiction built into the idea of collaborative art practice: either strongly or subtly, it needs to point towards a mythical Absolute Author in order to mark the distinctiveness of its own authorial operations. And this contradiction has a connection to the big, noisy, complicated argument that's been underway over the last few years – over in the main hall, as it were – regarding art and the politics of collaboration. This discussion fixes on the apparent impossibility of reconciling the ideal of aesthetic autonomy with the demands of ethical practice: on "the contradiction that is created when art's autonomous criticality is superimposed onto art as a socio-economic nexus of power" in Kim Charnley's succinct summarization. The atmosphere generated by this

³ Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, Edinburgh University Press 1992, p. 27

“savage and [apparently] irresolvable dialectical opposition”⁴ has reached such a high temperature that an art writer sticks her head round the door onto it at her peril. However, it seems worth asking if a shift of attention away from *aesthesis* and towards *poiesis* – away from the idea of art’s aesthetic *effects* and towards its poetical *processes* (its potential for the creation of new forms, new meanings) – might be of help, given that the philosophical construct of *poiesis* can be used to anchor the discussion of autonomy across every area of the institution of society, not just the aesthetic. Getting to grips with that involves continuing, energetic, foundational excavation of the whole idea of authorship, and talking to artists – reflectively, self-reflexively, and without fear of the complexities and contradictions of those collaborative conversations – is clearly part of the critical process.

⁴ Kim Charnley, *Dissensus and the politics of collaborative practice*, in *Art and the Public Sphere* vol.1 no1, 2011, p. 49