

A Delicate Duelling

Based in Christchurch, New Zealand, Edwards+Johann have been working as a collaborative artistic duo for over 10 years. During this time they have developed a highly idiosyncratic practice that traverses a range of different media. At the core of their partnership is a methodology founded on processes of exchange, compromise, trust and robust communication. The artists themselves have called their approach an act of 'delicate duelling'.¹ Concepts are molded through a push and pull of ideas, creating a kind of generative friction. Indeed, as Catharina van Bohemen has previously written, the 'plus' in Edwards+Johann is carefully chosen to reflect this space of generative potential; a creative threshold space, which extends beyond their individual identities toward a rather more enigmatic shared territory.² The resulting works are often characterized by a sense of playfulness, otherworldly-intrigue and off-beat whimsy.

In recent contemporary art, collaboration and social or collective projects have emerged as a significant mode of practice. Yet, as Ellen Mara De Wachter writes, these practices have historically been caught in the 'blind spots of art history', a discipline that has had trouble shedding its allegiance to the individual maker.³ Claire Bishop similarly points out that collaborative practices can be more difficult to place within our existing art world lexicon than those by individual artists. Collaborative projects, she observes, are less likely to produce 'works' in the singular modernist sense than 'social events, publications, workshops, or performances'.⁴ Certainly this is true of Edwards+Johann, who approach the notion of collaborative work in a multifaceted way. Not only are they together makers of images and objects for exhibition in the more traditional sense, but their work also frequently takes the form of performative gestures or stagings, and often embraces projects that actively engage with the communities within which they work.

Both Bishop and De Wachter allude to the ways in which this form of open collaboration contests some of the traditional hierarchical structures embedded within art practice and discourse. In shifting the parameters of their making toward more inclusive models, collaborative practitioners seem to demonstrate at least a desire toward a more democratic sensibility. This is an ambition that can be read – whether implicitly or explicitly – as a political orientation, cast against the backdrop of the capitalist systems that define much of the 'Global North'. Neoliberal economic regimes that privilege individualism are subtly undercut by the disobedient manoeuvres of collective activity, underscoring and challenging the assumptions and normalized behaviours that support these global dynamics. In a similar way, the political potency of collaboration has been a critical strategy in practices that have sought to interrogate and disavow cultural discriminations. Within feminist art practices, well-known collaborative networks including The Guerilla Girls and the makers of the *Riot Grrrl* zine have provided a platform for group action and community building. And closer to home, collectives such as Mata Aho are adopting frameworks based in mātauranga Māori.

Yet it is important not to valorize unnecessarily the efficacy of collaborative art, and to remain cognizant of the pitfalls within these paradigms. Bishop again has warned of the potential for social or collaborative works to fall into the realm of spectacle, or to exploit the

¹ Edwards + Johann in Felicity Milburn, 'No Direction Home', *Rebel Knights and Other Tomorrows*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Christchurch, 2014, unpaginated exhibition pamphlet.

² Catharina van Bohemen, 'Artistic toils X2', *Artzone*, No. 57, Nov–Feb 2015, p. 26.

³ Ellen Mara De Wachter, *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration* (London & New York: Phaidon, 2017), p. 15.

⁴ Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', *Artforum* 44, No. 6, February 2006, p. 179.

very labour they ostensibly seek to engage.⁵ The ethical dimensions of social and collaborative endeavours can thus be fraught with problematic entanglements.

Edwards+Johann enter into this arena as co-conspirators who entertain the vexed nature of the field. Working collectively requires both a positive attitude toward the unknown and an openness to failure. Driven by the acts of making and doing, their work is exploratory and without any preconceived sense of what might ultimately be realized. In this sense they strive to remain adaptable, and encourage the challenges and opportunities that are presented both inside and beyond the studio. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that in their practice there is no real beginning and end, but rather an ongoing negotiation of ideas, materials, people and places, existing in a constant state of ebb and flow.

The contributions presented in this publication start to unravel some of the themes and concerns that have emerged over the course of Edwards+Johann's collaborative partnership. Indeed, one might begin to think of the conversations unfolded within these pages as an extension of their collaborative practice, drawing together in open dialogue voices that at various points both overlap and diverge, representing the forces of harmony and dissent that are so foundational to collaborative art.

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⁵ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 238-239.