

Artistic toils X 2

By Catharina van Bohemen

The word collaboration derives from Latin: *com* – with, and *laborare* – to work, thus: ‘to work together.’ The tradition of artistic workshops is well known, especially in the Renaissance, but the resulting work bore the name of a single master, and the artists who possibly painted large sections of it, nameless apprentices. In the Romantic period, the solitary artist journeying through landscape gradually dissolved into various twentieth century artistic movements from which collaboration, meaning *equal* participation, developed. European duos such as Gilbert and George, Eva & Adele, and Fischli/Weiss, to name a few, made art which defied the notion of the artist toiling alone until the work was unveiled in the Olympian space of a gallery. Their art has been a quest to see their world in its chaotic variety, and involved the deliberate collision of painting, photography, sculpture, installation and performance. It was surprising, discomfiting, mysterious, and either confounded or delighted the expectations of their viewers.

Christchurch artists and collaborators, Edwards+Johann, who have worked together since 2007, are an antipodean link in this chain of artistic partnerships.

They are not, however, Edwards and Johann, or Edwards & Johann, or Edwards/Johann. They are Edwards plus Johann. That binding plus is more than a conjunction of two artists with their complex particularities, but represents the emergence of an 'energy field' within their artistic coupling. Edwards talks about 'the push and pull' of this alliance in which each artist is nudged and extended, so the art that grows in this 'hybrid space'¹ is more than the sum of their separate parts.

'We're always really careful about the plus,' says Johann. 'People have sometimes pulled us apart – calling us Victoria Edwards and Ina Johann (even Ian!) – although we submitted as Edwards+Johann.'

They like the ambiguity of their surnames – that they are two boys' names.

'On a political level,' says Victoria Edwards, 'the art world is still dominated by the myth of the male genius making marks in a particular way, but we're two girls in this together – it isn't one of us who's the driving genius.'

'That me-ness gets in the way,' Johann says.

Edwards adds, 'Now we see so much potential in collaboration, why would we go back to individual practice?'

As our Skype conversation unfolds it's apparent from the way they listen, pause, consider, never interrupt, that the mental space they give each other extends naturally into the physical space of their studio.

'There, everything is up for reassessment,' Johann says. 'We don't want to repeat – a space can be a cage – but we're out to explore the unknown, to find another space which makes us think differently about how we live in this world and what we think of it.'

Edwards+Johann are both originally print-makers with a shared and ongoing

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PREVIOUS PAGE:
On the seam of things
– *Days and Knights 1 & 2*, 2013, detail, drawing on glass over mixed media work on paper, unique diptych, 550 x 800mm

OPPOSITE:
Stumblings# 7, 2009, drawing/collage on Fabriano Artistic 100% cotton rag, 410 x 510mm



preoccupation in drawing and materiality – a strong response to site, and process: Victoria Edwards was born here and Ina Johann immigrated from Germany in 1997. 'I had no studio but I could draw and I had a camera.'

How did they come together? 'It wasn't a "let's-be-a-collaborative-partnership decision,"' says Johann. 'We'd spent years getting to know each other through teaching and assessing students' work together and then supporting each other after we left teaching. Our first work was a video projection work², and we found that something happened when we were together that we couldn't quite put our finger on but were really excited by the process. It went from there. The more we went into it, the more possibilities arose and then it became practice – it just is.'

One of their early collaborations, which won the 2009 Margaret Stoddart Award, is a photographic diptych: *Looking At – The View*. It is a pair of self-portraits and an excellent example of how individual preoccupation is enriched by collaboration. In the first frame, a photograph of Johann, who studied geography, is superimposed before hills dotted with lichen-like markings and stunted triangular pines. She seems both to appraise the viewer and consider her own position within this landscape. 'I'm interested in place,' she says. 'Maybe that comes from being an immigrant... how we perceive place, how your perception changes over time when you leave and enter.'

Edwards's head by contrast is turned towards the sea – the private gaze reminding you of the equivocal Curnow lines³, 'Simply by sailing in a new direction / You could enlarge the world', and, 'Always to islanders danger / Is what comes over the sea.' 'Going overseas' is a trope in our psyche, one also accompanied by

ABOVE:
Stumblings#7, 2009, drawing/collage on Fabriano Artistic cotton rag, 410 x 510mm, framed

OPPOSITE:
Knight in the Wilderness #3, C-Type photograph, 2013, 1070 x 820mm, framed



apprehension of the unknown. The water behind Edwards is sensuous and ambiguous: soft rippling waves play before three dark rocks beyond which the sea surges towards a smudged horizon.

Both figures are swathed in white, the colour of reflection, freshness, and new beginnings, but such simplistic impressions are undercut by the swirl of patterned scarves spilling from elaborate head-dresses or fastening them more securely. We can't see Edwards's face and Johann's is covered in white paint – almost a mask. The figures are close to the frame creating an uncanny intimacy – you can nearly touch them. But you don't. Even though their costumes beguile, and the work's glacial beauty seduces you, it also makes you uneasy as if you're confronting a riddle or a not-quite-grasped fairy tale.

This duality typifies their work. It also touches on another aspect of collaboration: the idea of 'play' as a means of self-discovery. Edwards+Johann love to dress up – in scarves, kilts, ribbons or feathers. You might see their faces, but then again they might hide behind visors or grilles – or even weird red disks, possibly tomatoes, (to take the tomatoes from one's eyes is the German equivalent of the English scales falling from the eyes). As 'self-portraits' these constructions suggest both the artists' essential selves and who they become by dressing up. Role play liberates, teases ideas of identity. Edwards+Johann self-portraiture: its jackdaw assemblages of costumes and found objects bound with string mocks notions of self-representation and opens both the artist and the viewer to the magical possibilities of, 'What if?'

Their latest work recently shown at Christchurch Art Gallery's Outer

ABOVE:
installation view:
*Rebels, Knights and
Other Tomorrows*,
Christchurch Art
Gallery Outer
Spaces. Image:
John Collie, 2014

OPPOSITE: *On the
seam of things –
Days and Knights 1
& 2*, 2013, drawing
on glass over
mixed media work
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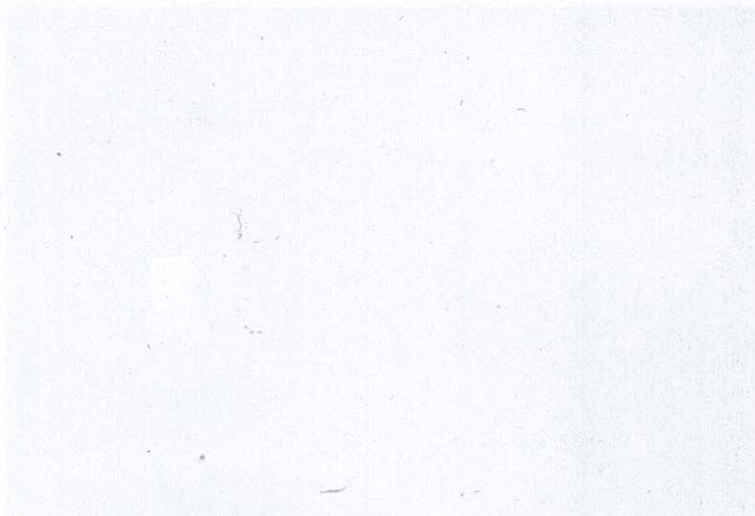


Spaces is a comical yet deeply serious meditation on 'What if?' Entitled *Rebels, Knights and Other Tomorrows*, it is a multi-media installation of photographs, sculptures and the elusive sound of bells or perhaps the wind. The Christchurch earthquakes affected them profoundly – their studio was damaged and contents destroyed by liquefaction⁴. This installation is a response, not only to the city's rebirth, but also to adversity.

In a darkened room seven knights in black garnished with scraps of lace or false hair seem as mad as Don Quixote without the moderating sanity of his squire. Inflated chests, blind gazes, false hands, surreal symbols of office highlight their personal self-aggrandisement rather than collaborative consultation necessary for the common good. The Accidental Rebels are seven rocks hurtling through or over brilliant colour fields of orange, red or yellow. Their meticulous placement both acknowledges what was once solid or ordered, and the unforeseen (accidental) consequences of upheaval. But... nature abhors a vacuum. Seven strange human-sized Probes roam through the gallery as if in search of solutions. They're made from organ pipes salvaged from a church and sprout bright tendrils. Some are in family-like groups, others stand apart considering – the Knights? The Rebels? You? Sounds and silence ebb and flow as you walk through the exhibition evoking *The Tempest*: 'The air is full of noises / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not'⁵, and you ponder the multifaceted benevolence of the number seven.⁶

This has been a busy and successful year for Edwards+Johann. Before the exhibition at the Christchurch Art Gallery, they were Artists in Residence at

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Otago Polytechnic and finalists in the 2014 Parkin Drawing Prize, the National Contemporary Art Award and the Wallace Art Awards.

In January 2015 they take up a three month residency at Altes Spital, a cultural centre in Switzerland keen to have them precisely because they are a collaboration. They are similarly excited, having been to Scotland – twice – ‘embedding’ themselves in the Perth Museum⁶ where their work included a tableau vivant with students and videos unexpectedly enhanced by an invigilator at the museum who sang for them⁷. ‘She offered us that,’ said Johann. ‘We enjoy engagement and working with others – becoming connected with the people and their histories. We hope for the same in Switzerland.’ ■

1. Blundell, Sally, Edwards+Johann, Rebels, Knights and Other Tomorrows, Bulletin176, Christchurch Art Gallery, p13
2. <http://edwardsjohann.com/work/category/installation/fishing>
3. Curnow, Allen, ‘Landfall in Unknown Seas’ from Early Days Yet – New and Collected Poems 1941-1997, AUP, Auckland1997, p226
4. <http://edwardsjohann.com/work/detail/31/Faculty of Wonder – Lost and Found>
5. Shakespeare, William, The Tempest, III, ii, 129-131
6. <http://edwardsjohann.com/work/category/residencies-and-projects/>
7. <http://edwardsjohann.com/work/detail/30/Revealed By Detective Work>

Footnotes are links to Edwards+Johann’s easily navigable and informative website: edwardsjohann.com

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