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Combination, Collaboration and Creation: The Case of Jasper Johns

Peter Murphy

Great art is marked by emphatic individual styles. From Titian to Jasper Johns, Van Gogh to Frank Stella, the individuality of major works of art and leading visual artists is unmistakable. We do not need to be told that a painting is by the hand of Rembrandt or Jackson Pollock. We can see that at a glance. The individual style of a great artist is difficult to miss. Such styles can be copied, parodied and caricatured. The irony is that what is most individual is also most generic. It translates easily into a type that can be imitated. The paradox of great art is that it is the imitable inimitable. That paradox is further underscored by the fact that such art, individualised as it is, is more often than not deeply shaped by collaboration. That which is most emphatically individual frequently bears the impress of the collective milieu, relationships and projects that populate the background experience of the working artist. Serious artists without question are self-possessed. They are driven by singular visions of what to create and how to create. Yet often they enter into relationships with partners, collaborators, aiders-and-abettors, affinity groups, milieu, and muses that are indispensable to their work.

Part, but only part, of this has to do with the artistic ego. All egos, not least of all artistic egos, have vulnerabilities. That is to be human. Collaborations of different kinds aid, boost and enable fragile egos. Artists who are starting out on their life's work or who have reached an impasse need support. The same applies to intellectuals and, indeed, to human beings in general. While there is some truth in the old existential view, well summed up by Jean-Paul Sartre, that hell is other people, it is also an indubitable truth that we need other people. But whatever anxieties and weaknesses haunt artists, collaborators and muses are not simply props for threatened egos or instruments for the ego gratification of great artists. Certainly there are plenty of examples of the monstrous or tyrannical artistic ego. But just as importantly, in fact more importantly, collaboration is a mirror of creation. Collaboration, which can take on an infinite range of forms, has structural features that are akin to the nature of creation itself. Collaboration therefore functions as a preparation and a foil for creation. It is a visible acting out of the inward creative process. Collaboration is an outward experimental test bed for a combinatory process that is intrinsic to the inner nature of crea-

tion. Through collaborative relations, the combinatory process of creation is started, re-started, adapted and evolved.

Creation is a mystery. It is a mystery because it produces something out of nothing. Conversely, the core of creation that is undetermined and spontaneous is subject to determinations and conditions. This is why the act of creation is such a puzzle. It is one thing (determination) and another thing entirely (indeterminacy). It is subject to rules and in that respect it is akin to production. Yet as most careful observers acknowledge the act of creation cannot be reduced to rules. So it is a very uncanny thing, and this uncanniness is replicated in artistic relationships. The artist who literally “does his/her own thing” easily falls foul of self-indulgence. Artistic choice must be met with artistic discipline. Artistic ambition must yield to artistic conditions. While some artists are able to choose the conditions under which they work, nevertheless those conditions do exist. The creative collaborations of an artist mirror this paradoxical mix of freedom and discipline. In the everyday world, other persons condition each of us. They condition what we can do and how we can do it. In doing so, they limit and modulate the excesses of our own choices. In the world of the artist, the collaborative other is the one who acts as a determination of creative indeterminacy. Collaboration is one of the ways—though it is by no means the only way—in which creation’s indeterminacy comes to assume a determinate form.

Creation is an unlikely phenomenon. In the act of creation, things that do not normally belong together are brought into connection. This is true of the miraculous coupling of indeterminacy and determination. The startling nature of such conjunctions lends artistic works their aura of intense individuality. Works of the imagination stand out. We register them as being sharply distinct from ordinary works of production and everyday events, even when works of imagination celebrate the ordinary and the everyday. In fact, at every turn such works do the opposite of what they seem to be doing. Thus while we apprehend these works as distinctive, and as set apart from the quotidian, a large part of their power has to do with the imagination’s capacity to draw things together as opposed to set things apart. The power of the imagination is synthetic rather than analytic. It unites, integrates, and unifies what normally we think of as being in opposition. Where other mental functions—such as that of critical judgement—draw distinctions, the imagination makes connections. What the imagination produces, our critical faculties judge. Not every connection that the imagination makes works. But those that do, especially those that are audacious and unusual, startle our faculty of judgment. In doing that, in creating connections between what is normally disconnected, the imagination produces

bold syntheses that are perceived to be—and are critically judged as—individual, outstanding, distinctive, and unique.

Such mental operations, both the critical-analytic type and the imaginative-synthetic type, are mirrored in the world. We rehearse and act out in the external world both critical demarcations and synthetic unions. Artistic lives are torn between these two poles, as are human lives in general. We habitually draw demarcation lines and then search for ways of overstepping or passing through those lines and boundaries. We cannot escape this double movement. Sometimes it is tragic and sometimes it is comic. The artistic ego, and artistic identity, is partly fuelled by critical demarcation. We are who we are in part because our ego has boundaries. What we identify with—for example artistic or intellectual identifications—are discrete, demarcated and bounded forms or entities. A strong artistic ego is separated and separable from others. The works produced by that artist have distinctive characteristics. They are critically judged as unique, original, singular, as having a signature style, and so on. At the same time some artists enter into collaborations and partnerships with other artists. These are relationships of relative equality. They are different from cases of rampant ego, where an artist dominates, uses and abuses others who become the means to the end of an uncontrollable artistic ego. Collaborations require boundaries to be stepped over, and yet upheld and reinforced at the same time. This is not easy, and collaborations do not always work. Sometimes they fail miserably. So why bother with them?

The answer to this question is that collaboration is an outward expression of the inner process of creation. Artists rehearse creation through collaboration. Collaboration is not the only way an artist rehearses or prepares the creative process. Some artists do not collaborate and yet are unquestionably creative. Yet, for others, collaboration is an important and even indispensable way in which they initiate acts of creation or re-energise themselves when inspiration has been lost. Modes of collaboration vary enormously. They can be on-going, periodic, or occasional. They can occur with other artists, with technicians and managers, or with friends and lovers. Collaboration is not of one kind, sort, or type. It is difficult in many cases to establish what exactly the collaborator or help-mate contributes to a specific work or project. This is because the contribution is often intangible, emotional or spiritual in nature. Yet even if it is intangible, it is essential. It is crucial because it is a rehearsal or an acting-out of the process of creation. It is a warm-up for the imagination. It is this because collaboration is to human relationships what combination is to the act of imagination. In the act of imagination there is a fusion or union between individual elements. In collaboration there is a fusion or union between individual personas.

To understand this better, let us look at a particular case, that of the American painter Jasper Johns. Johns was a frequent collaborator in his early and mid career years. His first collaborative work was with Robert Rauschenberg. Like many outstanding artists before him, Johns flourished in a tiny milieu of exceptional talent. In New York City of the 1950s and 1960s, Johns formed close ties with Rauschenberg, John Cage and Merce Cunningham—all of them major figures of the period. Cage and Johns created the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts in 1963.¹ From 1967 until 1980, Johns was Artistic Adviser to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. In that latter capacity, he worked with Frank Stella on *Scramble* (1967); with Andy Warhol on *RainForest* (1968); with Robert Morris on *Canfield* (1969); and with Bruce Nauman on *Tread* (1970). The Warhol collaboration, as Cunningham relates, happened this way:

I was with Jasper Johns at an exhibition and Andy's pillows were just piled in a corner. I immediately thought they would be marvellous on stage because they moved, and they were light, and they took flight. So I asked Andy and he said, "Oh sure." Some of the pillows were filled with air—they stayed on the floor—but some were filled with helium and they floated. The dancers had to understand the technique of working with them: you had to push, not kick, to get them to float. When we first did *RainForest* they had only had one rehearsal with the pillows, and a lot went out into the audience. We used them once in an event we did in *Persepolis*—we thought they would look marvellous against the stone pillars. But it was an open-air performance and most of the pillows got away. They were easy to take on tour, though. The air-filled pillows could be deflated, and the helium ones we gave away to children.²

Johns adapted Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* as the décor for *Walkaround Time* (1968). Cunningham tells the story:

We were having at dinner at the Duchamps'. John [Cage] was playing chess with Marcel's wife Teeny [Alexina] and Marcel was smoking a cigar, watching. Jasper had the idea of making a set using elements of *The Large Glass* and he went over and asked Marcel. Marcel said, "Yes, but who would do all the work?" Jasper said, "I would," so Marcel said that would be fine.³

Johns also did the set for *Second Hand* (1970) and *Landrover* (1972), and in 1973 designed Cunningham's ballet for the Paris Opéra, *Un jour ou deux*, with music by John Cage.

The interweaving of these artistic personas and forms was epitomised

in the performance by John Cage in Los Angeles at UCLA in September 1987 for an opening of an exhibition of the Samuel Beckett-Jasper Johns collaboration *Fizzles*. Marjorie Perloff, who was there, recounts that Cage's performance included three short mesostiches on the name JASPER JOHNS, including this one that had appeared in Cage's *Empty Words* (1979) under the title *Song*:⁴

not Just
 gArdener
 morelS
 coPrini,
 morEls,
 copRini.

not Just hunter:
 cutting dOwn
 ailantHus,
 cuttiNg down
 ailanthuS.

The Johns-Beckett collaboration was not very successful and more or less marked the winding down of Johns' collaborative impulse. But by that point the impulse had done its work. What that work was, exactly, is the question that remains.

The significance of collaboration is not just two or more people working together and producing an outcome. That has variable results. In some media, working together is optional. In other media, like dance, it is more or less obligatory. Given that Johns' principal medium was painting, collaboration was optional, but, looked at from the angle of the imagination, it was a necessary option. Collaboration has a strong elective affinity with imagination. It is a preparation or exercise for the imagination. With the passage of time, as artists fully mature, such preparation becomes less necessary. Collaboration is a trigger to start or re-start the imagination. It acts as a sympathetic lever for it. This is possible because collaboration and imagination share features in common. Both unite different frames of reference. Collaboration unites differing ambitions, temporalities, work rhythms, goals, locations, styles, and media. Artistic creation unites differing forms, shapes,

patterns, materials, concepts, images, styles and media. The act of synthesis is a metaphor of creation. The act of creation draws together what normally is set asunder. Artistic distinctiveness is the fruit of paradoxical, highly individualised, collective acts of creation. These works are singular, and yet a type. They are the work of a signature, a name, inimitable, and yet a kind, a category, a style, and eminently imitable. Herein also is the conundrum of collaboration. It is collective yet individual, hostile to stereotyping but generative of creative typologies.

One of the most powerful typological distinctions of twentieth-century art was that which distinguished between personal-expressive and impersonal-objective art. Johns came to artistic maturity in the art world of New York largely dominated by the personal-expressive style. It is difficult now to conceive of abstract expressionism in painting without thinking of Hans Namuth's iconic photographic images of Jackson Pollock caught in a state of dance-like motion hovering above his canvasses, dripping, splashing, and splattering paint onto the surfaces of his compositions. This is pure expression. The same is true of Andy Warhol's silk-screens and films of himself and his collaborators at The Factory, or the propulsive rhythmic narration of Jack Kerouac, hammering out the drum-beat story of himself and his buddies on the road. Ginsburg, Burroughs, Cage, Yoko Ono, Miles Davis were all show men and women. Jasper Johns was not. He was not reclusive. That was not it. Rather, more simply, his works were not about "me"—whether that "me" was expressed through the acts or the motion of dripping, driving, howling, cutting, screaming, or blowing. In the objective mode (in contrast to the expressive mode) the art work is about objects. It is not that there is no artist who "objectivates." It is just that what is "objectivated," namely the art work, is about objects, things, and states-of-affairs rather than states-of-being. The persona of the artist is reticent rather than flamboyant. This is a fine distinction. Nonetheless it is one that is recognizable. Some artists of Johns' generation, like Philip Glass and Lou Reed, fit into both modes at once.

One road to the objective mode of art is collaboration. Collaboration is also a media of expression. In the case of in-expressive or objective art, collaboration is a way of withdrawing the persona of the artist, of encasing it behind the impersonal mask of partnership and cooperation. In these cases the rapport or the bond between artists is not the point of the artistic act. Neither does the personal connection and intimate association become the subject matter of the artistic act. Rather personal bonds are the facilitating means through which the objectivation of an object-orientated style is achieved. Such bonds foster feelings of impersonality that contribute to the imaginative delineation of objects in the world, their uncanny super-

definition by the artist who makes them stand out from the ordinary. Johns' gift was to make the ordinary object appear extraordinary and to draw out of the utilitarian thing its grace. This lent his work an aura of irony that was conspicuously missing in the case of the abstract expressionists.

Creative collaborations are driven by friendships between personalities who are often not noted for their friendly nature. It is precisely such a contradiction, as long as it is mastered, that makes collaboration and creation productive. We see Johns' work reach maturity at the same time that he is drawn into the collaborative and inter-medial world of Cunningham's dance company. Dance as an art form synthesizes theatre, choreography, movement, music and set design into one. To do this, it relies on a large number of creative collaborators. The work of a painter is a lonely one compared with an art company, yet the demands of creation in solitude nonetheless bear a distinct resemblance to the task typical of the art company of having to integrate multiple media and personalities. In the art company, as in the company of artists, collaboration is an analogue of creation. Both rely on combination. The distinctiveness of Johns' work rests on forms of inter-medial synthesis that parallel the multi-medial and inter-disciplinary nature of the art ensemble. Johns' first major work, *Flag*, 1954-55, combines visual, tactile and textual elements—the traditional oil painting on cloth, the encaustic (beeswax) texture, and the newspaper fragments in the work's collage. *Painted Bronze (Savarin coffee can with brushes)*, (1960) unites the work of the sculptor with the oil medium of the painter. The effect is uncanny. It appeals to the brain's faculty of synaesthesia. *MAP* (1963) is the visual analogue of this doubling effect. Johns' map of the United States landmass blends imperceptibly into the surrounding ocean—vigorous grey-blue brushstrokes unite land and sea. The work is a united states of the senses, with encaustic texture, textual collage and stencilling, and the visual combination of anonymous grey, striking swatches of primary colour, and secondary colours that emerge like illumination from under grey surfaces.

Good Time Charley (1961) combines objects (a ruler and a can) with a painted encaustic surface, the paintwork blending smeared pigment and brushstrokes. Works around the same time, *Devices* (1961-62) and *Periscope (Hart Crane)*, (1963) add stencilled letters to this fusion. *Fool's House*, the Wittgenstein-inspired work from 1962, unites oil on canvas with domestic objects, a cup and broom. The two dimensions of the painting surface merge with the three dimensions of the quotidian objects. The sweep of the dangling broom is a beautiful visual metaphor of the artists' brushstroke. 1964's *Watchman* unites a sculptural piece, a cast of a thigh and calf seated on a chair, with oil on canvas. 1972's *Untitled* marries oil, encaustic and collage with flagstone and cross-hatching patterns, and the

subtle interweaving of symmetry and asymmetry. 1982's *In the Studio* combines a painted sculptural body part (a hand and segment of arm), a two-dimensional sketch of the same, a hanging strip of wood protruding from the canvass, a cross-hatching pattern and a smeary, blurry, drizzle pattern. 1983's *Racing Thoughts* divides the painting surface into a symmetrical bi-fold, one half dominated by cross-hatched and wood grain patterns, the other half a domestic wall transformed by patches of painterly colour, with the paintings' surface as a whole turned into a background overlain with a fore-grounded series of imaginary objects. This imaginary foreground includes images of the painters' dealer, the Mona Lisa, a bath tub, a skull and crossbones poster, stencilled words, Barnett Newman's 1961 lithograph *Untitled*, and a commemorative ceramic pot.

Racing Thoughts culminates and tacitly questions Johns' spirit of combination. If creativity is the act of drawing disparate elements together into a unity, it is nonetheless notably difficult to achieve this in practice. Failure ends in eclecticism, pastiche, confusion and incoherence. It is both necessary and at the same time hard to create a singular artistic style based on multiple elements. In *Racing Thoughts*, Johns skirts the limit of this. The work teases us with the implied question of how far we can push the multiplicity of an artwork before it destroys its own unity. That there is a limit is suggested by the fact that after the era of *Racing Thoughts*, the impulse to multiplicity becomes more subdued in Johns' work, just as in parallel step his collaborative impulse declines. The more subdued style culminates in the late 1990s with the beginning of the series of paintings on the theme of the catenary, the geometric curve that is an idealised representation of the hanging chain. This reaches an exquisite zenith in *CATENARY (Henri Monnier)* in 2000. The work has the familiar Johns' style of an encaustic painting on canvas with objects, yet it is characterised by an almost neo-classical symmetry and equilibrium. The catenary has the feel of suspension—the uncanny state of affairs between rest and motion. In the catenary series, the dangling objects in Johns' earlier work have been transformed into a metaphysical state that appears to bend without compression. This is a metaphor of the ideal state of collaboration and creation. It summons up an impossible condition. This condition implies both weightiness and weightlessness at the same time. For the serious artist, this is the ideal state of art. It is also what collaboration promises, the miraculous state of weighty matters transformed into feather lightness, the uncanny mix of gravity and grace. Collaboration in reality never really delivers that. Egos and circumstance invariably get in the way. Goals, ambitions and energies never quite match. We do not especially remember Johns for his work with Warhol or Stella, but that hardly matters. For the metaphysical

promise of collaboration provides an enduring image of what might be. This continues to play on the mind and the soul of the artist long after collaboration is done with. It eventually finds fruition in that handful of marvellous works that forever leave their mark on us.

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NOTES

- ¹ The Foundation was later renamed the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.
- ² Judith Mackrell, "The joy of sets," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/jun/06/dance>
- ³ Judith Mackrell, "The joy of sets," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2005/jun/06/dance>
- ⁴ Marjorie Perloff, "The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage's 'What You Say,'" <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/cage.html>