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Utopia Becomes Reality Collaboration-Lived Harmony

Erika Billeter

*I think today
that collaboration is the solution
and can bring us the harmony
which is capable of
saving art from unlimited confusion.*

Jean Arp

Collaboration between artists has a considerable tradition. A specialisation of painters and sculptors, for example, is known to have existed since the fourteenth century. In the studios of painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries work was split according to genres. Some specialised in landscapes, others on the staffage figures which animated them. Of this kind of combination of genres no more.

This exhibition shows the collaboration of Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco Clemente. In the above context this exhibition makes us curious and poses questions. Since when has such a form of artistic communication existed and who were its authors? The collaboration of Warhol and Basquiat, and also the combination with Clemente, is the fruit of mutual inspiration. It is shaped by common intellectual standards. In its course each one of the involved artists keeps his individual signature style. And nevertheless each one reacts in his own way to the others work. The result is a group painting which has been completely thought through, in and of itself. It is the expression of harmony among artists. A prerequisite is a profound connectedness in thinking and artistic expression. It manifests itself as the congruent expression of similar ways of life. It is the central thread which connects these artists. This phenomenon only manifests itself, however, in the twentieth century. Nevertheless the first precursors can already be found in the romantic movement, which postulated the already extant requirement, even yearning, for artistic communality, which takes on form in a painting.

"We spoke to each other about the state of art today. We all felt strongly that it had fallen very low and all of us offered, almost simultaneously, to do what we could to resurrect it. We shook hands, and an allegiance was created, which hopefully would hold strong".¹

In 1808 the "St. Lukas-Brüderschaft"(St. Lukes Brotherhood) was formed. It was the first unified group of painters. However, they did not paint together. But they certainly thought and felt together.

¹ Eckart Klessmann, *Die Deutsche Romantik*, (Cologne: DuMont, 1979), 3rd Edition 1984, p. 49.

Later this artistic group was to enter the annals of art history as the "Nazarenes". They stand at the beginning of a long history of artistic groups, all of which have become fairly well known. The group experience provided strength. The group was an important buttress in the effort to face a critical society, in which the single artist played the role of an outsider. At the same time it became clear that this was the best, because most effective way, to establish a new movement in art. This realisation led the Dadaists, as the first group, to work together in their art. One of the first collaborative works, however, was created slightly earlier in the circle of the "Blaue Reiter" ("Blue Rider") and was only recently discovered in the Landesmuseum Münster. This canvas was painted by two close friends, the artists Franz Marc and August Macke. They created the work in 1912. It was to document their identical orientation and mutual friendship.

One of the artists who passionately believed in the task, and the calling, of collective work was Jean Arp. In Sophie Taeuber he found the ideal partner to realise this faith with. They found to their collaborative artistic creations because of similar concerns for art as the Nazarenes had had in their day.

"We were looking for an elemental art, which was to heal the people from the madness of our age."² Both were agreed that the way ahead for creativity lay in the anonymity of the collective. Between 1916 and 1919 they designed, in an almost identical and reciprocally complementary vision of their artistic task, the foundation of their later work.

It is represented by a large number of "duo works", collages, embroideries and wood objects. One of the first highlights is the stuck pictures of 1918-19. They consist of rectangles cut out and arranged in strict horizontal and vertical compositions.

For both Sophie Taeuber and for Jean Arp the geometric, clear composition and the denial of traditional means of design in these years of invention were "the alpha and omega of fine art."³

On several occasions leading up to 1943, the year of Sophie Taeubers early death, they executed collaborations together. In 1937-38 works in wood were created, and in 1939 a series of duo drawings.

Especially in drawing, in which the hand of the artist presents itself so clearly, they prove their conviction that only through the harmony of collaboration can the true work of art be created. For them it only became essential through their collabora. "This mixing, knitting together, dissolving; this negation of boundaries is the way which leads to the essential."⁴ In this work their longing for harmony was satisfied. It became an expression of their love. In it they anchored the mutuality in their ways of thinking, feeling, and in their artistic wills.

In no single work can it be determined which part is Jeans and which is Sophies.

The constant dialogue with the work of the other had become such routine that it was not of interest to them to keep their signature styles apart. The works appear to have been conceived in one mind and executed by one pair of hands. This couple is probably the most wonderful example of an absolute fit, of pure harmony, in which an utopia - namely the wish to achieve exactly this harmony - has been realised in a work of art.

One of the largest collaborations of these two is the renovation of the "Aubette" in Strasbourg, for which Theo van Doesburg was also called to help. It was not the last time that Arp was to work together with a painter friend, ever true to his motto: "that we can use the hand of our brother like

² *Sophie Taeuber - Hans Arp*, Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern 1988 "Zur Besonderheit eines Zweiklangs" by Agnieszka Lulinska, p. 62.

³ Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern, op. cit. p. 66.

⁴ Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern, op. cit. p. 71.

we can use our own... a communal reality must become clear above the individual."⁵

During the war, in exile in Grasse, collaborations between Arp, Taeuber, Sonia Delaunay and Alberto Magnelli were created. "We tried to forget the terror in the world. We drew, watercoloured and made lithographs together, and thereby created one of the most beautiful books... All vanity, arrogance, rivalry had been eliminated."⁶ These pages are an exciting game that the artists played with each other. Each one's individuality can be appreciated. But each one reacts to the other, takes the other as the starting point of his own ideas. Arp also did collaborations with Kurt Schwitters. For him a friendship also had to find a concrete artistic expression.

"Schwitters and I sat for hours deep in rhapsodic dialogue. This poetry would be channelled into his novel... Later we went down into the studio, in the revolting-beautiful Merzgrotte... There we glued our paper pictures."⁷

Max Ernst was also very interested in collaborating with his artist friends. Together with Arp he worked on the spirit of a creative friendship in an almost playful way. Arp loved his friend DADA-Max's collages. Max Ernst, for his part, was an admirer of Arp's poetry. Given their openness for collaboration nothing could have been more natural for them than to do it. In the FATAGAGAS, collages with hand-written poetry, which contribution is by which artist cannot be made out. This was exactly what the authors had been striving for. "The point was to subjugate each individual contribution in such a way as to make the personal signature style of the collaborators disappear behind a new concept - of togetherness."⁸

That which the Dadaist had wished for had become reality: a "true collectivity".⁹ During their summer holiday together in Tarrenz in Tyrol in 1921 Arp and Max Ernst wrote "s Fatagagalid" (the fata gaga song), which was published in DADA AUGRANDAIR, "Der Sangerkrieg in Tirol" (DADA INTHEBIGAIR, The Singers War in Tyrol). Tristan Tzara, as well as Paul Eluard contributed to this publication.

Max Ernst, in his text "Comment force l'inspiration" wrote about the possibility of working in groups. This was a component idea of Surrealism. In the second surrealist manifesto André Breton had noted: "We think we have provoked an exotic thought: of a Collective Process".¹⁰ The "cadavres exquis" are the most convincing examples of the idea, so central to surrealism, namely of the collaborative venture. These drawings were created between 1925 and 1939 - at the time in which the surrealists were active in Paris. Max Ernst saw in them the purest expression of the surrealist work ethic. "In the hope of maximising the chance appearance of elements which form the basis for the composition of any drawing, to increase it, and also to increase the immediateness of associations, the surrealists have chosen to work using the process of the "cadavres exquis"... the important role that chance plays is, for the first time, limited by the importance given to conceptual infection".¹¹ This "conceptual infection" which Max Ernst speaks of is characteristic, even a fundamental element, of any collaboration. Conceptual communication must take place for a work of art which is the fruit of a collaborative effort to find its compositional equilibrium. The "cadavres

⁵ Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern, Gabriele Mahn "Vom wechselnden Dreiklang", p. 76.

⁶ Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern, Mahn, p. 83.

⁷ Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern, Mahn, p. 79.

⁸ Werner Spies, *Max Ernst - Loplop*, (Munich: Prestel Publishers, 1982), p. 106.

⁹ Catalogue Kunstmuseum Bern, Mahn, p. 79.

¹⁰ Werner Spies, op. cit., p. 20.

¹¹ Werner Spies, op. cit., p. 20.

exquis" are the clearest proof of a joining of minds, because each artist came to a piece of work which he had not even seen. The paper was folded, and the next followed blindly the tracks of the first. The surrealists were marked by such a similar mental approach that the works appear to be from the same mold. Not only painters took part in these collaborative works.

The poet friends, Breton himself, Paul Eluard taking the lead, also keenly drew their contributions. They all helped to realise Breton's term of the "mise en commun".

It is valid for all collaborations what Arp had already aspired to during his Dada period: the expansion of his own artistic horizon. But all artists also looked for, in the mutuality in their work, a dialogue with and an understanding of the other. The reciprocal artistic exchange always led to the liberation of individual energy which together increased the combined creative potency. This is true of Matta and Victor Brauner painting together in 1956, and for the young Jackson Pollock who, for a brief period, saw the possibility, in collaborations with William Bazotes and Jerome Kamrowski, of finding a way into abstract painting. Arnulf Rainer has created entire cycles of work with Dieter Rot, and also with Günter Brus. In these works a conceptual bond becomes clear which literally required collaborations. They are always intelligent attempts to approach a subject together and to see how far artistic opinions are identical, converge or deviate from each other.

At the beginning of the eighties a group of painters in Berlin expressed their friendship and "joie de vivre" in collaborations. Rainer Fetting, Salomé and Luciano Castelli let their appetite for painting together run loose. The paintings were created in the form of triptychs. Each painted on one canvas, but also left traces on those of the others... they painted at the same time, in the same studio, canvas next canvas. When they felt the urge they made music, did performances and shot films. In retrospect these collective activities seem like invocations. In the common act of painting, in their presence on stage together they tried to fix the ephemeral counter. They also attempted to cement a human relationship, a friendship, rough an image.¹² There are friendships among artists that become absolute, dissoluble partnerships, as for example in the case of Gilbert & George who, although two artists - describe their exhibitions as "one-man" shows. Their work stems from a unity of thought and perception. They have grown together to become one artistic personality.

Similarly Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who since 1979 have been telling stories and parables with objects. Only a congruence of will can lead to a so perfect, indissoluble tune.

That is very different with Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle, that incomparable couple, that created landmark collaborations. Collaboration as a dialogue between the sexes, a constant celebration of Yin and Yang. They are examples of a unique bond and evidence of being perfectly in tune with each other, in the midst of their artistic opposites. The iron artist Tinguely with the bulky, rough, industrial, technical forms converses with the round, soft, plastic and colourful figures of Niki's playful dream world. They combine emotion and rationality to create an astonishing world of forms, in which play and earnest connect in a wonderful way. The pinnacle of this hefty artistic discourse, which ultimately dissolves in harmony, is without doubt the Stravinsky fountain in Paris. It is the incarnation of the masculine and feminine principles. The authorship of the individual compositional elements is unmistakable. For both the point of departure is the work of Stravinsky.

Both artists vary and interpret it according to their artistic ideas. The result is a dream-world of opposites. But they turn and move together - these soft coloured forms and the black machines. They make the water flow. Invisible behind them is the constant dialogue between the two artists. An unmediated spiritual confluence has uninterruptedly taken place during their lives together. In 1961 Jean Tinguely had spontaneously said, after having put together the wiggling, dancing, playful "Balubas" series of works: "This is Niki". The Stravinsky fountain expresses, as Pontus Hultn has

¹² Erika Billeter, *Luciano Castelli - ein Maler träumt sich*, (Bern: Benteli Publishers, 1986), p. 68 and following.

said: "a freedom and security of collaboration which is exceptional and naturally rare. It is a part of something which has been going on for years, of a successful team."¹³

Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle were an artist couple well aware of their friends - and in their way of maintaining and activating outside friendships not unlike Taeuber-Arps. Their faith in the force of friendship saw itself materialised in a huge monument. In the forest of Fontainebleau stands the "Cyclope". Over many years Niki, Jean Tinguely and his closest friends Bernhard Luginbühl and Daniel Spoerri had begun to realise a labyrinthine and monumental piece. Eva Aeppli, Soto and Larry Rivers also helped. In 1987 François Mitterand declared the collaboration the patrimony of the French state. One of the largest collaborations between artist friends - which is rather more a family venture, as Luginbühl likes to put it¹⁴ - has now been made public. The spirit of solidarity which Jean Arp and Max Ernst had strived for as "true collectivity" has here found a significant monument. Buried in the heart of the forest, protected by trees. A romantic idea realised in a romantic place.

The collaboration between Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol and the Japanese painter Kaii Higashiyama, on the other hand, was quite different. By fax they sent simultaneously drawn messages around the world, arriving on the 12. January in the Liechtensteinpalais in Vienna. "Global-Art-Fusion" promoted a message of peace: "half an hour of artistic, cross-border collaboration - a serious game for peace."¹⁵ May the message of the Japanese artist end this text: "Even the grass has the gift of life".

¹³ *Jean Tinguely - Nike de Saint Phalle - Stravinsky Fountain*, Paris, (Bern: Benteli Publishers 1983), Pontus Hultén, "On the spirit of collaboration", p. 24 and following.

¹⁴ Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, *Pandmonium - Jean Tinguely*, (Bern: Benteli Publishers, 1990), p. 281 and following.

¹⁵ *Global-Art-Fusion*, Catalogue Bern 1986, no page.