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## ***Collaborations as Exchange and Method***

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Our current term "artistic" implies uniqueness and individuality. Every collective effort, any work done in a team seems to be, at least in the realm of the visual arts, a crass contradiction of the originality of the creative act. What exactly this creative act should be is generally unclear, and even less we ask ourselves about the subconscious influences and relationships which all works of art are subject to and without which they would be unthinkable. Indisputably the idea of the uniqueness of the artistic "creation" has something to do with the concept of genius, which established itself in the seventeenth century, and was borne of the clash of the aesthetic views of the "anciens" and the "modernes".<sup>1</sup> The champions of the new declined the antique world as a model and thereby made room for the creation of genius, which, through invention, can single-handedly take command of the world of art and ideas. Genius needs no models to articulate itself as inimitably individual, blessed as it is from the outset with originality.

Despite this widely held view there are some cases, starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which an artistic practice of collective thinking and acting, sometimes even of collective working became a necessity for progress. Temporary collaboration seemed to make sense whenever a mutual aim could be achieved more easily with reciprocal impulses and suggestions. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque worked together closely in 1910, during which time a conceptual and stylistic interaction took place between the two painters. Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky felt their way towards non-representational painting together. Sonia and Robert Delaunay influenced each other in their search for "abstraction", just as the painter Amédée Ozenfant and the architect Le Corbusier developed "purism" together in the twenties.

In the late sixties and seventies the idea of the artistic co-production had a revival. Political, social and also technical-technological reasons are probably the cause. "The practice of developing one work with another or many other artists has many reasons which demonstrate how little the realisation of such collaborations at that time had to do with chance. For many the decisive factor was the realisation that the artist had to reply to the expansion of the boundaries of art by himself expanding the boundaries of his traditionally single production."<sup>2</sup> It is easy to recognise the impetus of this era, the spirit of an utopian collectivism, which brought with it the need to change existing structures by replacing them with new ones. The changed political and intellectual atmosphere clearly favoured the birth of artistic mini-groups, not least because of the changed roles of the sexes.

As remarkable examples of such associations of the sixties and seventies the names of Bernd &

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<sup>1</sup> Jochen Schmidt *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens 1750-1945*, Vol. 1, Darmstadt 1985, p. 16 and following.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Schwarz, "Kunstlerethen - zwischen Tradition und Emanzipation", in *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 28, April 1978, p. 19.

Hilla Becher, Gilbert & George and Anna & Bernhard Blume as well as Peter Fischli & David Weiss could be mentioned. The engine driving the collaboration between these artists is the wish for a continual exchange of ideas and experiences through a productive process, in the course of which the individual is transformed into a different self, which leads to new and sometimes unexpected results.

It is certainly necessary to have a polarity of opposite but still compatible qualities to achieve a workable combination of forces. The works which are fruits of such a collaboration carry a uniform orthography, i.e. the part of the individual in the final product cannot be ascertained, which means that the individual consciously retreats to make way for an artificial, more potent subject.

The collaborations of the eighties, on the other hand, of which those of Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco Clemente are paradigm, are quite different. In contrast to the collaborations of the couples such as the photo artists Bernd & Hilla Becher they are temporary in nature. Whereas the technical and conceptual collaboration of the German duo forms the foundation, one could even say the guarantee for the realisation of their overall project - typographies of industrial buildings - the collaborations of Warhol and Basquiat are solely the means to an end. The goals are also different: the planned lifetime co-operation compares to these collaborations, limited projects bent on immediate mutual enhancement.

The limited partnership that existed between three so different artists as Warhol, Basquiat and Clemente in 1984-85 was based on the understanding of the work of the other. It was a constant give and take. This is corroborated by the testimony of Keith Haring, who also did several collaborations with Andy Warhol, which characterises such a venture: With time Andy got to know and came to appreciate Jean-Michel. The more he saw of his work the more he liked it. Finally Andy trusted Jean-Michel so much that he even let him decide the cut and "sculptural" design of his hair. Their mutual esteem came from more than just an understanding on aesthetic issues. They were both fascinated by the tortoise shell in which the other was hiding. The secret Warhol felt challenged by the confusion of Basquiat.<sup>3</sup>

Within one year the 55 year-old Andy Warhol and the 22 year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat had painted more than 100 paintings together, which all have a very particular style. In most cases one can tell the hand of each quite clearly, since the artists did not try to cover their tracks. On the contrary, the signature style and the motifs show quite clearly which artist was responsible for which contribution within the collaboration. Andy Warhol usually created the basic structure of the painting by transferring certain symbols or signs on the prepared canvas by use of a silkscreen. They were company logos like that of General Electric, lines of newspaper copy, reproductions from magazines, product catalogues and popular medical books that Warhol had obviously been pondering. As Charles Stuckey has described it<sup>4</sup> these snapshots were projected on the canvas and traced in paint or applied using silk-screen. These basic elements, usually in black and white, were then "complemented", i.e. denatured with other motifs. The collision of these often foreign images and very different styles and techniques results in the partly estranged, partly provocative, sometimes also humorous and deep character of these works, which often refer to political and social conditions of the time.

All three of the involved artists used the encounter of the pictorial ideas of the others to find, in this competitive environment, a quick-witted answer to the challenge of a foreign style and method. None of the artists has in any way adapted himself to the others; on the contrary, in many of the paintings there are tense dialogues, meetings of different worlds. Warhols impersonal, mechanical

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<sup>3</sup> "Keith Haring, Warhol & Basquiat", in *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 107, April/May 1990, p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Stuckey, *Andy Warhol*, (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1992), p. 18.

painting machine meets the spontaneous letters and Graffiti openness of Basquiat and the sensuous, bodily plasticity of Francesco Clemente, a meeting of three very different mentalities: the American, the Caribbean, the Italian. Andy Warhol, as the most experienced artist, surely attracted the younger ones to him because he needed new ideas and stimuli. The collaboration as a way of working had already existed in the sixties in the factory. The later collaborative paintings enriched Warhol's body of work by a new dimension of collaboration, which for him was always something simultaneously impersonal and productive.