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From A to B to C and Back Again Collaborations between Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Francesco Clemente

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Friendship among artists can become a form of competition if their work develops into a collaboration: this is part of its appeal. It is rare among painters, though the history of modern music has provided much evidence that collective improvisation can be a highly disciplined and yet liberatory experience for the players and audience alike.

The collaboration which was proposed in 1984 between Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Francesco Clemente, in which three groups of four paintings would be passed between the New York studios of each artist, with each one adding to, erasing, or overlaying the work of another, was a competitive game. Artistic style became the issue between them, as well as the personal relationships, generational differences, and widely disparate cultural backgrounds of each artist. Calculated risks were also at stake, because any contribution one artist were to make could be canceled by the next player. The form of the game may have been suggested by ancient children's game (taken up by the Surrealists in the 1930s), the *cadavre exquis*, in which the head, torso, and limbs of a prototypical body were divided up sequentially and separately imagined by different players in ignorance of the images created by the other artists. In the case of these paintings however, images were superimposed, as a part of the painting was not hidden from view.

In contrast to the hidden elements characteristic of this game, or of most card games, these triangulated collaborative painting exhibit only too clearly the marks and strategies of the previous artist. Trumping is not an option, because the objective is not to surpass or beat the others. These paintings are not, therefore, a form of laying false trails such as Marcel Duchamp's professed preference for playing chess over making art. Rather, it is a form of "working out," even more precisely boxing, the dancing, feinting, ducking, punching art whose exemplar from the 1960s onward remains Muhammad Ali, the poet of the ring.

Though the three-way working partnership of these artists was short-lived, Warhol and Basquiat continued to work together (or at least with each other) for some months, and eventually held a collaborative exhibition in New York for which the poster showed the two artists as sparring partners, with boxing gloves raised, stripped for action.

For Basquiat, the boxing ring was one arena in which the ideals of his black heroes such as Jack Johnson or Sugar Ray Robinson were played out. The other was the jazz nightclubs where Charlie Parker (*Charles the First*, 1982) or Dizzy Gillespie (*Horn Players*, 1983) performed, the high point of the extraordinary mixture of composition and collective improvisation which marked bebop. Basquiat was an aficionado of the greatest jazz, and an overt champion of black contributions to modern American culture. He was photographed by the elderly James Van der Zee, the recorder of the prewar Harlem Renaissance as a conscious act of homage to his mentors and to the richness of

"mongrel Manhattan"¹ during the era in which music, poetry, dance, and painting were vitally connected.

Andy Warhol, the senior artist of the trio, had collaborated in various ways with others since the 1950s. One of his earliest collaborators was his mother, Julia, who provided the calligraphy for many drawings in the years after they first moved to New York. Warhol employed other assistants too, such as Vito Giallo or Nathan Gluck, whose styles became indistinguishable from his own, and photographers like Edward Wallowitch made prints which Warhol used to trace or project to make drawings. Later, his Factory became a huge collaborative industry, with various associates contributing ideas, shooting films, silkscreening paintings, or even impersonating the artist himself for interviews and lectures.

The *Collaborations* with Basquiat and Clemente marked a new departure for him insofar as contrasting textures and stylistic character were visibly apparent. These paintings prompted Warhol to return to "pop" imagery, common logos from commercial sources in print advertising and supermarket packaging. These paintings also marked Warhol's return to hand-painting, which he had largely forsaken since the early 1960s, when he first developed his practice of silkscreening on canvas. Even through the 1970s and early '80s, when it was widely assumed he had stopped painting altogether (other than commissioned portraits), he continued to work on series of drawings which were rarely exhibited, and he went through a short-lived but exuberant phase of thickly brushed and colored painting with the *Mao* and *Ladies and Gentlemen* series in the early 1970s. Paradoxically, however, just as the examples of Clemente and Basquiat allowed Warhol to start painting by hand again, his "identifiable" contribution to these works was to photo-silkscreen images - either the GE logo (Warholian) or a symbolic fish, labeled FISH (Basquiatian). In the multi-panel works *Pale Star* and *Pure*, Warhol distances himself physically and conceptually still more by taking Polaroid photographs of a canvas worked on by Basquiat and Clemente and then making multiple, serial, monochromatic silkscreened panels.

For Francesco Clemente, the principle of collaboration was familiar in two quite distinct ways. He had already made illuminated manuscripts with American poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Harry Mathews, and John Weiners, in which the written and visual elements were independent and yet mutually supportive. The year previously, in 1983, he had also begun work on an illustrated edition of Alberto Savinio's prose text *The Departure of the Argonaut*, which was to occupy him periodically for three years. In this sense, the idea of collaboration was a conversation between sympathetic sensibilities, overlapping and suggestive of new relationships between line, script, color, and image.

Even before he settled in New York in 1981, Clemente had also collaborated with traditional artists in Jaipur and Orissa in India, where he had spent long periods of time since the early 1970s. Using local skills in miniature painting or sign painting, Clemente made works on paper of widely variant styles and scale, though when seen in the context of his work as a whole, they always retained a measure of his identity and iconography. For Clemente, the process of passing paintings from studio to studio corresponded with his notions of each artist being free to draw on a vast pool of pre-existing imagery and styles, transformed anew by the hand of the artist. One may speculate as to the origins of this generosity of spirit in Clemente's Catholic upbringing and attraction to the living and continuing spirituality of India.

For each of the three artists, collaborating was to forfeit nominal control of the finished (or unfinished) product. In fact, it is impossible to see these paintings - and some drawings - as definitively resolved and completed works of art. That is not to say that the artists did not

¹ See Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, New York, 1995.

consciously hand them over to the world outside their studios, but that no formal resolution is really possible when new elements were continually being added or obliterated by the following collaborator. In the multi-panel painting *Pure*, a symbol of the game being played is made visible: three playing cards, fanned out but blank. No hierarchy, no king, no queen, or knave. These are the pure canvases, waiting for the marks of collaboration, of friendship, of rivalry, or betrayal.

This group of paintings is part of its time and place, New York in the early 1980s, one of the most fascinating and uneven deposits of that moment's creativity. The collaborations are more poignant still, remembering that two of the three participants have since passed away.