

## Collaboration is a Curious Lover:

### *Knowing and undoing creative partnerships, in relation to the work of Zoo Indigo*

#### **Jam, Darling?**

Zoo Indigo is a collaboration. It's the two of us. Ildiko Rippel and me. When we facilitate workshops, we nod, wink and smile. We spontaneously add ideas, tasks and images. When one of us laughs, we are urged on. There is a knowing born out of thirteen years of working together that doesn't need words. We teach at different universities, work with different artists, watch and read different work, and we share all this with an understanding that we are teaching each other.

In the making space we experiment without fear of failure. We don't hide our sweat patches, we accept our eccentricities, we understand the learned delicate modes of reining each other in. We roll our eyes with acceptable disdain. This partnership has lasted longer than any of our lover relationships. But this has never been a full time occupation and having breakfast together is still a treat and stepping into the rehearsal space is like having a hamper of fresh croissants, jam and coffee delivered in the morning.

In the early stages of our devising processes we mostly call upon the skills of a multimedia artist, who we have worked with for ten years. He has learned to translate our wild gestures into an artistic dialogue. He enters just as we plant the seeds of our slightly shambolic making processes, and is able to see the flowering. He drinks his coffee black with no sugar and we have it ready when he arrives. He is part of our knowing.

And I don't remember what happened before. There must have been an age, when we started in these working relationships, when we didn't *know*, when we got the coffee order wrong, when disagreement was a problem. There must have been moments when the panic of 'should we be doing this?' entered the room. But time has smudged the ability to recognise that now.

## Knowing and cheating

Sometimes, when I put my six year old son to bed, we abandon the books of night-time comfort and we co-story tell; this is a treat when our eyes are not too heavy. I start with something like, 'Once there was a boy called Dylan, one morning he woke up blurry eyed to see.....', he picks up the line and when his imagination momentarily flounders I continue, until I need an injection of something new. And he picks up again, adding in space creatures, blue dinosaurs, meteorites – taking the story to places my adult brain would struggle to reach without prompting. And so we bounce back and forth into adventures we would not have found independently. This is a simple and effective collaboration. We allow each other space to develop an idea, we go with it and add to it, we egg each other on until the unbelievable happens; we build on each other's imaginations. Sometimes we return to this story over consecutive nights and refine it. Sometimes I think he writes in ideas that he knows I will question/laugh at/misunderstand. Sometimes I think he believes we really are writing a series of children's books. Sometimes I think that's what he wants me to think he thinks, so we can keep going with a sense of direction. This is a collaboration of knowing, of playing, of testing, of pushing within the safety of a partnership.

This 'knowing' is found in the intimacy of relationships where you can no longer define the moment when the shorthand of conversation became commonplace, when sentences didn't need finishing, when an angled smile spoke more than...

In Lone Twin's *Ghost Dance* (2008), the performance duo line-danced in singular partnership, blindfolded, for twelve hours. There was no music to set a rhythm; they only had each other's footsteps and breath to keep in time. As their increasingly fatigued bodies missed steps, they re-found a shared synchronicity. The pair have collaborated for sixteen years, creating a range of intense durational projects (e.g. *To The Dogs*, *On Everest*, *Spiral*). In these times they reached exhaustion, loneliness, exhilaration - together. They have discovered a knowing, an innate sense of awareness, that enabled them to work in the blinded proximity of their *Ghost Dance*.

Tim Etchells wonders if this intimacy of long-term relationships itself is *collaboration*, a 'sharedness that doesn't have a name' (Etchells 1999: p54) or if collaboration is 'a game of consequences or Chinese whispers' (Etchells 1999: p55). Maybe it is both. Maybe, each time the relationship game is played, the places where

we can cheat, trip each other up, challenge the winner/loser to a duel, are found with more ease. For Ildiko and me, the knowing allows for an inoffensive mischievousness and certainly a layer of competitiveness. If I put a sugar in her coffee, if I change the lines of our learned text, if I suddenly play dead, how will she respond and how will I react in return? Etchells expresses a pleasure in the ‘...altogether messier world – of competing actions, approaches and intentions’ (Etchells 1999: p55) that the muddle of familiarity, collage and compromise of collaboration uncovers.

New Art Club’s Tom Roden and Pete Shenton (Roden & Shenton 2015) suggest that ‘compromise’ is too negative a phrase for the negotiations in this creative process. The exchange is not about making concessions, but about embracing a creative conflict. Shenton (Roden & Shenton 2015) advocates disagreement in the making process and implies it is an essential devising method that allows for a discussion to take place, which engages a more analytical process. Jonathan Burrows wrote ‘Collaboration is sometimes about finding the right way to disagree’ (Burrows 2010: p58). And I wonder what the right or wrong way of disagreeing is.

I can’t quite unpick the mess of our making processes. I know we disagree. Often. I don’t think we compromise, not when we are working as a pair. I think through our disagreement we find another solution, something that collides mismatching ideas and goes somewhere beyond, as when my son introduced pink aliens into our co-story. There is a definite point when the disagreements are heightened, during the tidying up period, when the edges need to be swept prior to it being called a ‘performance’. And sometimes we can’t come to an agreement so we leave some edges mucky, and sometimes these are the bits in our performances we most enjoy. The dirty areas that leave room for accidents that we don’t have to mop up. There are a lot of accidents in our process, and there is a naughty joy in leaving them in.

## **Shake up**

Sometimes the knowing becomes predictable, the cheating foreseen. Sometimes we wonder: what else is out there? Sometimes we want to remember what it was like to be at the beginning and to finish our own...

There’s a nervous excitement about having new people in our relationship, letting them into the vulnerable carnage of the making process. A longing to ‘experiment with new partners in different ways’ (Walwin 1997:p8). A sharing of eye

contact with more than one at a time. A misunderstanding of quizzical looks. Learning about boundaries of proximity; what makes them laugh, how do they like their coffee (or perhaps something herbal?) A desire to pull apart our identity of Zoo Indigo as a duo, in the hope that the risk this involves shakes us out of the safety of our partnership. Moving beyond the duo creates possibilities of scale and enlarges the performance image. It offers room to explore the impact of size and density of bodies in space. It demands a colliding of art forms, expertise and ways of working, and asks us to challenge our regularities.

But beyond our coupling, the rules need to change. Working with others is a new and complex game and Ildiko and I need to leave our privately negotiated play spaces to find a place where 'Me and me becomes us and we' (Cochrane in Carvalho 2014: p83). *Blueprint* (2012) was a Zoo Indigo performance work created in collaboration with two other female performers working together for the first time. Striving for a sense of 'invisible authorship' (MacDonald in Heddon 2012: p161) in the new formation, we knew our series of coded languages needed some undoing. Shannon Cochrane observes that collaboration between two artists is a secret place of 'Secret codes. Secret languages. Secret Jokes.' (Cochrane in Carvalho 2014: p82). A useful shorthand in a partnership, but an obstructive and alienating device in a group.

*Blueprint* was a personal work. It explored the relationships and genetic hand-me-downs from our mothers, passed down from their mothers. Each of our mothers was present throughout the performance via live video links, telling stories/jokes/singing songs/correcting our memories. We were protective of them (our mothers) and of our histories and precious about how to produce the performative images. The intimate connections with material in such a new group made for a delicate editing process.

In discussing the division of labour in collaborative structures, Rudi Laermans writes that, 'The social common produced in collaborative practices simultaneously comprises many moments in which the question of artistic worth or aesthetic value is explicitly addressed through group discussions and discursive negotiations' (Laermans 2012: p94). The *Blueprint* process was a multi-layered system of commonalities and of maintaining values not just of self-worth and aesthetic value but of personal history and immediate personal relationships (with our mothers). The commonalities were of a close social connection (we liked each other's company, laughed together, enjoyed similar music), common goals (the shared performance concept, use of autobiographical material), common relationships (all our mothers present on stage, many of our personal stories overlapping). The democracy of

collaboration was complex and exciting: our four voices, plus the four voices of our mothers, who had just a virtual - but very real - presence in the rehearsal space. The shifting systems of 'democratizing democracy' (Laermans 2012: p94) reigned over the material, and there was a joy in this. We failed to fuse our 'identities into one signature' (MacDonald in Heddon 2012: p161), and graciously accepted the failure. This was the performance.

We are in unknown territory. We are at risk. We wish we had more time. We are on a steady runway between falling and flying. It is messy. We present the mess with an urgent certainty that we cannot tidy the edges.

Without the shorthand of a long-term relationship, this group collaboration takes time. It is slower than we allowed for, forgetting that mine and Ildiko's learned modes of teasing each other into action grew over years. We all like each other. And it is nice. We are nice to each other. We take it in turns to do the coffee run. And that is nice. We learn who prefers sweet and savoury snacks. And we appreciate that. We are not competitive, we don't cheat, we daren't trip each other up, because it's too early for that. This is the honeymoon.

### **I like you like**

In a presentation for Liveart DK (Winters 2010) Gary Winters describes the moment he and his partner of Lone Twin, Gregg Whelan, crossed paths. It was a party; a friend introduced them; they began telling jokes and finishing each other's punch lines. They talked all night, walked each other home, made breakfast in the morning, and the expedition began. This was an artistic crush at first meeting. In this description, Winters highlights the food (two boiled eggs with mayonnaise and sprinklings of herbs) as if this were the final clincher of their relationship to be. When Shannon Cochrane outlines her score of *How to work* for one of her long-term collaborations, the first item on the list is 'eat lunch together' (Cochrane in Carvalho 2014: p82). Ildiko and I made our first piece when she invited me over to her small flat in Leicester for seafood paella. Shellfish terrified me, but a day's planning was in this colourful offering, so I hid my suspicion and ate my way through prawns, mussels, clams and squid (which I do now with more gusto). Food continues to be a core part of our working relationship – meetings are over breakfast/lunch/dinner and rehearsals are never complete without a few olives. It is not a new idea that eating together is a place for communication; in a space beyond the tensions of the rehearsal room, there is a sense of intimacy and familiarity that the ritual of eating allows for. And my food-passion is not a diversion, because the success of a long-term collaboration is about the shared enthusiasms beyond the walls of the making

space as well as a united creative vision. Interesting that on Lone Twin's website it states 'It's been 16 long years and they're still doing it. They still like each other and they still like Kate Bush'.

After experimenting with others, Ildiko and I return to a duo. And we still like each other. And we still like a coffee break at 11am, and a glass of wine at lunch, and the predictable moment when our joint laughter uncontrollably shakes the room. We relax back into sweat patches, eye rolling, disagreements, mess and too-long pauses.

As we prepare to leave the rehearsal space, she washes the cups and I bin the rubbish. I unplug the projector (because we still remember what happened last time), and she packs it up. We each take charge of our individual props. We are not sure who has stored the day's performance changes. We hope to meet for dinner soon. We dart off in opposite directions to do the school pick-up. The day's adventure sends us away wearily contented. But I am sure soon we will long for another shake-up, an escape from the safety of our partnership where we have seamlessly returned to finishing each other's...

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