

Co-laboration-Respond

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I could start this presentation by posing the question, “ what results from the meeting of a fashion and textiles lecturer, studying for her PHD in applied communication whilst continuing a professional studio practice in textiles and extensive international conferencing attending and a sculpture lecturer who acts as a cultural commentator on fashion and popular culture whilst exhibiting in major design awards, creating photographic works and fending off requests to discuss the latest art embroidery techniques, whilst researching the history of plate spinning and ventriloquism? The answer could be that sessional lecturers have a lot of time on their hands but, seriously, it’s the perfect scenario describing institutionally ensconced individuals looking beyond the restrictions of their chosen work fields and bringing their wealth of knowledge into a larger landscape. It could also be seen as a perfect example of two individuals closely knitting together the threads of their existence – teaching, practice and research.

A lunchtime conversation between colleagues in 2002 where the notions of separation anxiety and how we as adults deal with the transition to singledom established a framework for an ongoing artistic collaboration. Three of the discussion participants are arts practitioners who also work as academics in the visual art and design fields. A number of key themes were formulated at this first meeting and it was established that two of the artists would commence a dialogue around the notion of transition, a reasonably open ended agenda that has seen the project reinvent itself a number of times over the past two years. It was established that the Co-respond project would evolve alongside our own studio projects, hopefully not interfering with exhibition responsibilities we both had. As we collaborate into our third year it is interesting to note that Co-respond, and the works produced from this idea, have influenced both of our research and studio works. It has been described as a cross disciplinary challenge, made even more difficult by the two participants working at separate tertiary institutions both negotiating the transitional space between creative practice and secure career. It was agreed that all communication would be recorded and documented, allowing us a broad range of materials to curate the first exhibited project from. No specific time frame was established. We allowed ourselves the freedom to create and communicate at any time, often working for long periods in paid employment meant that the Co-respond project would have a number of extended breaks in discussion and creation.

The aim of this conference paper is to broadly describe the ongoing exhibition collaboration Co-respond, now in it’s third year. The project involves myself and colleague Laurene Vaughan and began in 2002 where we discovered we both had a passionate interest in the work of British psychotherapist and paediatrician DW Winnicott, particularly his publication *Playing and Reality*¹. This publication being the impetus for discussion about adult transitional objects. Both Laurene and myself were using Winnicott’s notions of transitional objects and transitional space within our own studio practice. The idea of transition covered a number of levels for both of us, beginning with the objects a child uses to transit the space between the mothers breast and the adult world and leading to our own cross disciplinary practices. There

¹ Winnicott,D.W, *Playing & Reality*: 1971 London Tavistock Publications

are a number of levels between those mentioned. We considered our positions as academics, working across both disciplines and institutions, the juxtaposition of academic theory and artistic practice and the opportunities available to us to visually describe a creative narrative. My studio practice focussed on the relationship between photography, textiles, installation and fashion whereas Laurene's areas of interest were textiles, design theory and architectural space.

It has been a keen interest of mine over the past few years to examine the possibilities of collaboration, stepping outside of my secure zone, be it the studio, the department or the institution and discovering what outcomes are possible when working in conjunction with a collaborator from outside one's general area of practice. The Co-respond project has allowed me to gain skills and knowledge not normally associated with my chosen teaching field.

From teddy bears to fashion spreads via beaded intestines and Eritrean bibles, the first outcome of the Co-respond visual conversation positioned the viewer in a transitional space of research and argument. A Broadway show chorus, carefully inscribed on translucent pink located one of the project team as the one most likely [or should that be loudly] to lead the conversation off on yet another tangent....*"I want to be a prime donna donna donna"*. As a collaborative project there has never been one artist taking precedence in terms of output or involvement in this narrative and site specific project. By exploring the multi disciplinary practice of contemporary art making one only needs to look at the works of Mike Kelley, Robert Gober and Ann Hamilton to afford them the impetus to explore new ways of describing emotion and location specificity. Through the use of a vast range of materials the Co-respond project establishes new arenas of discussion about the art making process. Is fashion art? When does craft become design? These are but two of the questions posed at the beginning of the Co-respond project. It was not the intention to answer all of the questions posed but to use these broad themes to establish a potential exhibition that flowed into a non curated outcome.

It is interesting to note that, at the time the Co-respond project was conceived, both participants were employed in a sessional teaching capacity across at least two tertiary institutions. This gave both of us the opportunity to teach and practice within two highly creative departments. Laurene Vaughan was employed within the Fashion and textiles department whilst completing her PhD in the School of Applied Communication, both at RMIT University and I was continuing to make a connection between the Visual Art faculty at Monash University Gippsland , a country based institution, and the Fashion and Textiles faculty at RMIT University in central Melbourne. Both artists were fortunate to have time to devote to their ongoing studio practices, allowing them the chance to participate in both conferences and exhibitions outside of the Co-respond project. DW Winnicott quotes in his 1953 publication *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena* *"It is in the space between inner and outer worlds, which is also the space between people – the transitional space – that intimate relationships and creativity occur"*.² The Co-respond collaboration continues to establish new ways of instigating creativity and research whilst producing a body of work, a monologue of personal meaning that sits beside the interchange of conversation.

The ongoing collaborative project Co- respond continues to visually exhibit notions of both the transitional object and transitional space across a number of national

² Winnicott, D.W. [1953] *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*, *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 34:89-97

institutional venues. Co-respond explores DW Winnicott's concept of the transitional object – the space between the self/ internal and the other / external – as it relates to the layered perspectives of cross disciplinary practice. The project, or exhibition, takes the form of a visual conversation between two artists [both initially trained and continuing to work within the visual arts and currently practicing as academics within the worlds of visual art and fashion and textiles] on how they understand and explore the diverse aspects of their current practice. That is a cross disciplinary professional practice that embraces both object / image making with academic theory and practice through the methodology of narrative [spoken, text and image]. There are many potential layers to the conversation: the nature and complexities of practice, cross disciplinary representations, explorations and referencing, and the nature of both the object and space of transition.

Winnicott's treatment of psychically disturbed children and their mothers gave him the experience on which he built his most influential concepts, such as the "holding environment" so crucial to psychotherapy, and the "transitional object", known to every parent as the "security blanket". He had a major impact on object relations theory, particularly in his 1953 essay "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,"³ which focused on familiar, inanimate objects that children use to stave off anxiety during times of stress.

The conversation continues through an exchange of objects, images and text, passed from one artist to the other. These items may have been transformed and passed back with a new perspective or placed aside as a new thought emerges sparking a new train of thought and discussion.

It was decided that the collaborative project would attempt to map sites, objects and narratives of transition. We wished to describe to the viewer an almost geographic locating of the journey from art to fashion via academia and practice. The only boundaries established during the initial discussion process would be these four chosen subjects as a starting point . Issues of site specificity needed to be considered once exhibition venues were located and Co-respond has already had a number of permutations, always allowing the viewer to occupy the space between the two sides of the conversation, a space we see as potentially silent, emotional or energy filled.

The commentary commenced with the exchange of two works, one an object of transition [a wine bottle cork embellished with pearls – my idea of a transitional fluid that allows me to lurch from one artistic zone to another,] and a text work reading Roller coaster, succinctly describing a contemporary creative life. Two somewhat humorous conversation starters that encouraged both participants to increase the dialogue of common interest. As the Co-respond exchanges continued it was evident that both participants were describing the journey they were each taking but influenced by the other's responses. At times one was pressured to reply to a body of work, fearing that the conversation would end or, at least, begin to portray ignorance and argument. When the Co-respond project was first exhibited it was noted that the viewer attempted to identify which participant created each work. By not identifying each work with the creators identity we felt that the conversation only enhanced the similarities in exploration and inspiration albeit from diverse disciplines.

³ Winnicott, D.W. [1953] Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena., Int. J. Psychoanal., 34:89-97

The first phase of the Co-respond project was exhibited at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art as part of the Space Between conference organised by Curtin University of Technology, a conference organised to explore the contemporary interface between textiles, art, design and fashion.

The second phase of Co-respond was presented as part of the Latrobe Valley Innovation Festival at Monash University, Gippsland Centre for Art & Design's Switchback Gallery. The project has also been included as a presentation at the RMIT University Colloquium for Innovating Research in Melbourne in late September. Plans are underway to involve international practitioners in the continuing conversation around the central theme of transition.

As the Co-respond project shifts from one exhibition opportunity to another the participants respond to the new site by making works that respond to the conversation so far. After being exhibited in Perth both artists made a body of work that reflected on what had come before. Interestingly, the works produced came directly from both of our current studio practices, demonstrating how much of an influence the cross disciplinary and cross institutional practice had been.

To discuss the actual outcomes of the collaboration so far I refer back to Winnicott's concept of transitional space, that being the space between the self / internal and the other / external. To have the opportunity to expand one's own personal studio practice and take it out into the larger public arena could only be seen as a positive benefit to a solo artist. Negotiating with a collaborator establishes broader criteria in terms of the final exhibited product where the usual self curatorial phase is now assisted by a co worker. Collaboration inspires confidence in ones own practice and a continuing discussion about new ideas between collaborators provides scope to establish new ways of working. My collaboration experience has allowed me to work outside of my usual themes of practice, supported by ideas and suggestions acquired from another discipline. The cross institutional experience has enabled both collaborators to form numerous new career relationships, broadening both practice and research fields.

Both project participants have established that the experience gained during this collaboration has influenced their professional studio practice and broadened cross institutional affiliations. As a two year project Co-respond can be seen as a solid body of work formulated by two academics over lunch going on to include a number of Australian tertiary institutions, two exhibition opportunities and discussions presently underway to establish a discussion of transitional space between Victoria, New Zealand, Paris and New York.

I would certainly recommend any arts practitioner to put aside their pre conceived notions of artistic practice, communicate with academics from other disciplines and institutions, be open to new creative ideas presented to them and to establish a link between common areas of interest in research and practice.

Biographical Details

Mark McDean has lectured in sculpture and visual art studio at Monash University – Gippsland Centre for Art & Design for the past five years. Along with his continuing studio practice involving textiles, photography and installation Mark was a lecturer in the Fashion & Textiles department at RMIT University from 1999 to 2004.