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Collisions, Co-opting and Collaboration: reflections on the workings of an interdisciplinary collaborative project—*in Conversation*

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The provocation for the 2014 contemporary arts exhibition, *inConversation* held at Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University (ECU) began as a declaration. We wanted to play and we wanted to play hard—with disrupting the siloed approach to research within the academy and mark out what the push and pull might be for individuals, collectives and for ourselves as participating artists and curators. The intent of this curation was to inform broader discussion regarding the challenges of cross-disciplinary collaboration and ways to engage researchers and artists to explore their discipline boundaries and connectivity.[1] Ultimately, upon reflection, we were interested in something akin to Charles Green's statement that artists examine the "shape and limits of the self, redefining artistic labor through collaborations" (2001). Us, immediately, is Christopher Keuh a design thinker, Lyndall Adams a contemporary visual artist and Renée Newman, a performance maker. Together we put out a call for contributions that asked participants 'to make what you will' in conversation. This benchmarking question was common to each group and was deliberately left vague and open to individual and collective interpretation. The only other stipulation we made was that the exercise must involve conversation with at least two other participants from fields other than their own. We define collaboration as "social processes whereby human beings pool their human capital for the objective of producing knowledge"(Bozeman et al., 2013) calling for the impact of this type of coming together to be recognised as not only significant but also complex and dynamic.

While we did not know what to anticipate, the most fascinating outcome from the exhibition were not the art objects themselves but the various manifestations of together or apartness that marked the process for the participants. This paper investigates the messiness of such an endeavour by sharing some of the experiences of the works in this exhibition; the moments of a collective 'Ah Ha' that we had along the way as witnesses to collisions, co-opting and genuine interesting collaboration and it is the experiential outcomes of the project which form the key investigative material

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[1] In 2014 the authors presented a paper at the ACUADS focused on collaboration and the curatorial intentionality of the *inConversation* exhibition titled: *Messy never-endings: Curating inConversation as interdisciplinary collaborative dialogue* (Adams et al., 2015).

and argument.

The overarching project brought together researchers from ECU with external local, national and international researchers with departure lounges as far apart as the French countryside and the Sunshine coast and pooled from fields as diverse as photography, architecture, performance, visual arts, teaching, politics, music, communications, writing, dance, science, a/r/tography and geology. Participating groups in *inConversation* adopted various approaches to perform, display, and/or represent their conversations. While some participants chose to represent their group through a dominant discipline, others shared their voices through common ground. Overall, the exhibition was concerned with the nature of coming together and the ensuing meeting points, blocks and paring with discourse and materiality, of curiosity and ambiguity.

As curators we requested that a group leader be appointed (for purely pragmatic reasons), and with that decision we inadvertently granted hierarchical power to that leader (Holert, 2011). In retrospect, this may have set some of the collisions and co-opting on their inevitable course. However, before we embark on that particular analysis certain definitions are required. Firstly, we identify that co-opting is the enactment of a group leader pursuing an idea in content and form and selecting participants with particular skill sets to achieve this idea. Collision is where there simply is no hope for a successful or affirmative outcome for the partnerships due to creative differences, personality clashes and leadership issues. Collaboration is not a neat process, often the complex processes and vying voices of the participants bump up against each other in order to create a shared vocabulary across disciplinary specific boundaries, where "at the very least collaboration involves a deliberately chosen alteration of artistic identity from individual to composite subjectivity" (Green, 2001).

The focus of Green's 2001 argument was "the need to unravel the enigma of alternatively constituted 'authors' and their link to the crisis of artistic representation, which [was] also a crisis in artistic intention" (p. xv). Fourteen years on, we find ourselves as artists within universities with a crisis of a different kind. Funding cuts, increased workload, job insecurity all look fairly dire nationally and within higher education the pressure to deliver creative outputs through practice-led research is an important criterion for the work we do (Wilkie et al., 2010). The art world as well as the field of arts education, now finds themselves caught in a balancing act. One minute professing the importance and necessity of research and reflection, and the next

minute resisting the real or imagined association with the perceived oppressive world of science and academia and of course, the neo-liberal persistence for increased performance and productivity indicators. This is an uncomfortable predicament, and arguably the discomfort manifests itself in the agitated tone in which people waver between defending different standpoints (Borgdorff, 2010). With this as backdrop we were interested in delivering an interdisciplinary exhibition that harnessed the creative energies of multiple bodies, multiples interests with multiple skill sets. One reason that the relationship of research collaboration to productivity is not straightforward is that not everyone means the same thing by ''research collaboration''(Bozeman et al., 2013). For the purposes of this paper in, "coming together" and "working together," both in the academic and the artistic sphere … Old borders are transgressed and different disciplines meet and, at best, fertilize each other. (Lind, 2009)
Fertilisation is key to what we see as successful collaboration, particularly in the movement between people, time, space and 'things'. In discussing "relational practices" Bishop argues that these "practices are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity–whether in the form of… or establishing one's own interdisciplinary network" (2006). The thrust of our research was investigating what happens at this nexus point of "interdisciplinary network": or as Taylor argues "through [the] interaction between disciplinary experts– rather than interdisciplinary generalists–our collective subject-specific knowledge can be made greater than the sum of its parts. This must be the essential and unique added value of a 21st century research-intensive multifaculty university" (2013).

Collisions, Co-opting and Collaboration
The disciplines of dance, visual arts and music in *Untitled 7 (Coleman et al., 2014)* (Video Clip 1) were maintained quite clearly whilst still engaging in a collision of movement, body, sound and the blending of immiscible pigments to confront notions of resistance and transformation. This group joined a dancer choreographer, three dancers, a composer (and three musicians) and a visual artist. The work was a semi improvised dance piece to semi improvised music set on black plastic with tubes of paint thrown into the mix. The collaborators sort to investigate the possibility for traces of 'liveness' after the event, and the body in space and time.

Video Clip 1: *untitled 7* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), video installation excerpt, (Coleman et al., 2014).

While collaboration cannot be planned or anticipated, adversarial partnerships can lead to really interesting and politically dynamic exchanges and perhaps in doing so can lead to a movement away from centrist thinking and making (Holert, 2011, Lind, 2009). But what if everyone involved went into the project with the desire for collaboration perhaps more akin to the nirvana concept of collaboration that seeks for a peaceful, communicative and leaderless engagement and yet came out with the opposite experience. The *Untitled 7* did not fail but from our perspective what was insightful was witnessing each participant's unwillingness to loosen control of their disciplinary specific practice and deliberately smash up against each other, which in this instance only led to confusion, frustration and at times desperation. On the whole there was a sense of not being heard. This was partly a frustration with how we set up the engagement with very few specific guidelines. There is something interesting in toying with the balance between ruled structure and gentle guidance that will feed into any future endeavours on our part. However, from our perspective there is something incredibly important that sits with intention in that "the utopia of truly shared, communal, multiple authorship always seems to be receding from sight. But the dream won't die … Collectives and collaboratives are still assumed to be intrinsically liberating" (Holert, 2011, para. 1). If what was intended with this group was a utopian collaboration albeit with no willingness to actually listen to each other, or to actually lose the definitive boundaries of discipline through intended adversarial conflict, then actual conflict, actual collision seems inevitable and the silo is preserved once again. Jacques Ranciere argued that "if we do not leave room for dissensus, we have neoliberalism or fascism"(as cited in Tait, 2013) however if all we have is collision then the only thing we are forced to do is to protect our disciplinary borders and close off our ears to possible conversation. However, the group leader of *Untitled 7* has initiated an ambitious collaborative venture for 2016 and so it seems we did not seriously break

anyone.

Dwell (Thompson et al., 2014) (Figure 1) was a convergence of the visual arts, a mixed media 3D artist, a cross-media artist and a ceramics maker working together to encapsulating notions of home, stitching time and place, interiority and the domestic. As predicted, this group produced a highly sophisticated artefact. This was the only group included that was not interdisciplinary in makeup. Highly organised, this group gave us no headaches—but one wonders whether their smooth sailing was the result of shared disciplinary knowledge. Although the work was highly resolved, their arts practice was extended only with the inclusion of a small projected image integrated into the work.
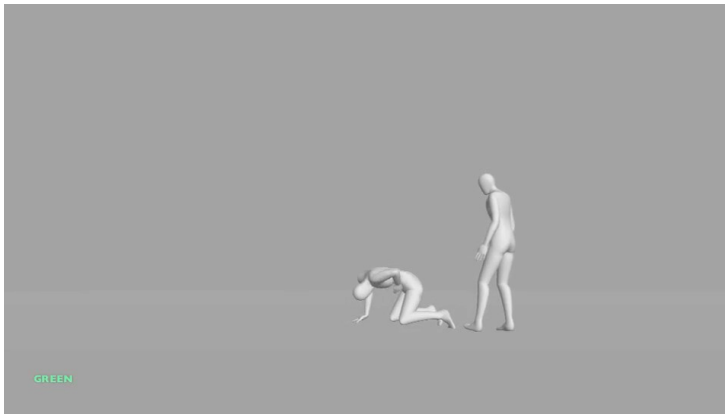

Figure 1: *Dwell* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), installation, dimension variable, (Thompson et al., 2014).

*Smoke and mirror*s (Delaney et al., 2014) (Video Clip 2) was a very different kettle of fish. A visual artist and disillusioned academic, a sound designer and a political scientist came together in dialogue on the discursive, the enacted, the nature of responsibility and of the nexus between solidarity and alienation in art and politics across continents and time-zones; or so they said. As with all things, exhibitions have a time frame that is fixed. The group leader of *smoke and mirror*s found himself nude in a field in France while his collaborators remained in Darwin. This video polarised audience in the exhibition. Gallery staff became very fond of our fly swatting friend through the course of the exhibition. While this must have been a difficult collaboration the result seemed like disparate elements solely created by the individual group members, which were then spliced together.

Video Clip 2: *smoke & mirrors* (from: *inConversation* exhibition)*, video clip excerpt, (Delaney et al., 2014).*

Video Clip 3: *E/Motion: Digital Acting and Motion Capture* (from: *inConversation* exhibition)*, video installation excerpt, (Metcalf et al., 2014).

E/Motion: Digital Acting and Motion Capture (Metcalf et al., 2014) (Video Clip 3) brought a theatre director, a Laban Movement Analyst and an e-researcher together. This group intended to play with motion capture; a research based rehearsal strategy and together found that perhaps the listening, hearing and concessions to each individuals' process was beyond the scope of the project, saying something more or less about how humans behave together. It seemed to us that this collaboration was a collision of disciplines with each holding very different idea about what collaboration was.

Figure 2: *Conversations with Ghosts* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), installation, dimension variable, (Uhlmann et al., 2014).

A visual artist, an architect and a writer attempted a *Conversations with Ghosts (Uhlmann et al., 2014)* (Figure 2). They were interested in the voice and voicelessness, of time collapsing and scratchings of past lives in pre- and post-colonial Albany, Western Australia. The project began with one group member related the story of a prison cell in Albany covered in engraved markings, deeply carved into the wooden jarrah walls by incarcerated 19th century European sailors and Aboriginal Australians. The team members visited the site on separate occasions, taking photographs, notes and frottages of the marks. They were "astonished at how many engraved images of ships and Aboriginal motifs covered the walls as vehicles of metaphysical escape". The walls of that one small cell–which is one of the oldest prison cells of the Western Australian colony, held silent stories of differing fates from numerous cultures and languages. In making this artist's book they felt that they were giving form to the voiceless while at the same time recognising that these engravings speak of the power of the human imagination to transcend the limits of the body. While highly polished we wondered what the outcome would have been had this group collided with each and the ghosts in the initial stages.

Dance, sculpture, writing and music were the disciplines in action in *Telephone* (McKenzie et al., 2014)(Video Clip 4). They discussed meeting points, the push and pull of egos and artistry and the proximity and distance that comes with acknowledged and unacknowledged solo or collaborative works or in other words the meeting place of spice, flavour, contaminations and concession. This grouped allowed the collaborative process to take its course—they learnt much from each other and produced a video installation that at once amused and challenged viewers around the

theme of digital dating.

Video Clip 4: *telephone* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), video clip excerpt, (McKenzie et al., 2014).

In the collaboration *Reality (Robinson et al., 2014),* (Figure 3), a visual artist meets CSIRO scientist and hydrologist to talk on fractal grids, near misses, real time and dogs on beaches caught in a momentary splice of time. In a smattering of words and phrases they described the process as: 'amazing, frustrating, enlightening, rewarding, knowledge crossover, intensities, nadirs, richness, group dynamics, dissimilar ways of discerning, fantastical ideas and proposals'. This group was particularly successful in allowing risks to be taken in open interdisciplinary dialogue. By letting go of their disciplinary stance and instead "flirting with this line of abolition, risking a complete failure of the collaborative group, encouraging it to be scrambled and mutated, with the danger of it being completely destroyed, because it is only in this manner that truly creative configurations emerge (Tait, 2013).

Figure 3: *reality,* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), installation, dimension variable, (Robinson et al., 2014).

A scientist, two visual artists, three writers, an ecologist and a cultural theorist came together to dialogue on *((Pollen))* (Phillips et al., 2014), (Figure 4) bringing with them unique perspectives from Canada, Sweden, Scotland and Australia. This group perhaps misunderstood the brief. From the initial two-member group plus a TBA, we saw the group grow to eight with an equal increase in demand for space a week before install. Each artefact was required to be attributed to the individual contributor (as in a group exhibition) as opposed to the required joint authorship specified by the initial brief. This approach produced what Wilkie et al describe in term of collaborative practice-led ventures as "outputs that are relatively closed and constrained" (2010). This project seemed at times to be a co-opting, a collision and perhaps a grouping of eight different art objects.

Figure 4: *((pollen)),* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), installation, dimension variable, (Phillips et al., 2014)

Conclusions

The opening statement of *a dancer, an artist and a designer walk into an ambush…,* the collaborative catalogue essay between three very different artist/writers, sums up our experience and intent nicely: "We've been asked, or maybe coerced, into framing an exhibition, which from its very conception, is destined to be populated with works that are incomplete and unresolved". (Barstow et al., 2014)

Originally we thought that we had an advantage in this messy business as originators of the idea—this was certainly not the case! Our work, titled *inbetween* (Adams et al., 2014) (Figure 5) commented on the relationship to the other groups and to each other from a curatorial perspective. The piece played with notions of empathy, movement, illumination and material forms of coming together in conversation such as sketches, photographs, drawings, schematic diagrams and emails. Our conversations gave us insight into the machinations of the other groups' false starts and cross-disciplinary dialectic mistranslations (both unintended and willful) as well as our own. We used these as the basis for a large-scale digital print: a wallpaper image of the three of us in various states of conversation. This process was at times a collision. While seemingly these three disciplines (visual arts, performance and design) have much in common, Renée sums up the group dynamic with:

I could see right from the beginning that what would be tough for me was the language barrier. Pith in particular is something that does not enter my world yet gesture resonates with me as *gestus*. I understood that what we were trying to do was to tap into our perception of the others' subjective response to whatever art may or

may not be considered to be. But what I wasn't quite prepared for was how much I felt like a child.

Completely lost. So how do we navigate through this to make work together? We get thrown in the deep end and we try to swim or at least we try to grow the space in which push and pull is not push over or pull out my hair. We try to suspend judgment or fear and see what can happen.

Figure 5: *inbetween* (from: *inConversation* exhibition), installation, dimension variable,   (Adams et al., 2014)

Interdisciplinary research for the purposes of the *inConversation* exhibition should have been an engagement exemplified by a leaving behind of the collaborators disciplinary specific ground. We would have liked to see a constant reworking of the repeated iterations of the research process created in the engagement from the various disciplinary fields involved, with a healthy dose of flexibility and range in the adoption of concepts and methods. In many cases this was achieved but with varying degrees of collaboration. In many cases "the research[ers] delivers context-related knowledge and understandings of the life domains it touches upon (Borgdorff, 2010). Our understanding of collaboration has not shifted. We would dearly like to see what "happens not when something common is shared between the collaborators, but when something that belongs to neither of them comes to pass between them" (Trinh as cited in Holert, 2011, para. 5).

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