

Creative Collaboration in Art Practice, Research, and Pedagogy

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Edited by

M. Kathryn Shields and Sunny Spillane

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To our friends and family,
especially at SECAC,
who make collaborating worthwhile.

In memory of
Nancy N. Shields
&
Mary H. McLaughlin

Stronger together.
—Hillary Clinton



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INTRODUCTION

REDEFINING CREATIVITY THROUGH COLLABORATION

Most people have no trouble conjuring the clichéd image of a creative genius suffering in isolation for the realization of their calling to paint, sculpt, draw, or write. According to scholar Cathy N. Davidson, though, 21st century-technology and the realities of our brain function promise to change all that:

Global teaming requires an inherent humility, an intuitive and inquisitive gift for unlearning and learning, because one's patterns and expectations constantly come into productive collaboration with those of people schooled in other traditions, other cultures (Davidson 2012, 205).

Moving on from the suffering, lone artist, in reality artists have long been forerunners in the arena of cooperative productivity—perhaps most notably performing artists. In a world where collaborations across disciplines and across vast distances seem omnipresent, how are visual artists and scholars affected?

This book came to life at SECAC¹ in Sarasota (2014) while we, Sunny and Kathryn, were sitting by the pool reflecting on our wonderful professional community. We thought, what better way to honor and celebrate those brilliant minds and professional relationships than bringing them together in a book? The first invitation was extended right then and there and the book you are now reading started taking shape. To be fair, the seeds for this idea began even earlier, when Kevin Concannon invited Kathryn to chair the SECAC affiliate session for the 2014 College Art Association conference. As she thought about what made SECAC special, the collegiality and the friendships stood out to Kathryn immediately. She started looking back at past conference programs and noted that in 2013 an astounding twelve SECAC sessions were dedicated to collaboration. That seemed significant enough to be the topic of the affiliate session. Three of the essays in this book were part of that CAA session, called “Collaboration

in Art and Art Historical Practice.” In October 2014, Sunny and Kathryn co-chaired a SECAC session entitled “A Pedagogy of Participation,” bringing in two more contributors. That was when we decided to edit this collection. We reached out to colleagues we knew and quickly expanded the list of contributors. We had a few more holes to fill and looked to SECAC members to fill in the gaps. It is no exaggeration to say that this book could not exist without SECAC.

This collection of essays reflects current and nuanced discussions of the ways that participation and collaboration can meaningfully inform the production, study, and teaching of art with inspirational, exciting, innovative, and unexpected results. The essays in this collection include both historical and contemporary approaches to collaboration as a creative methodology for art practice, art historical scholarship, and art pedagogy. Some of the questions addressed include,

- What are some desirable alternatives to the isolated creative genius myth?
- How can artistic collaboration best inform educational and business structures where independent results have long been required?
- How does a student or professional get “credit” for collaborative work?
- What value can we find in authoritative knowledge and how does it relate to collaborative and participatory forms of knowledge construction?
- Can we propose alternatives that embrace the complexity of participation?

Because there are numerous ways to discuss these dynamic and multi-layered essays, categorization and re-categorization is not only possible, but necessary (not to mention interesting). You will find that there is a great deal of overlap between the approaches and ideas in the essays and, as such, we could have organized them in any number of ways. By exploring the following alternative structure for arranging these essays, we can see a new set of concepts rising to the forefront of our consideration.

Several of the essays feature **Pedagogy** and as a section theme it would have highlighted theory and boundary-crossing as modes for teaching and working. Such a Pedagogy section would have brought together the essays by Sunny Spillane, Mark Dixon, Heather Harvey, and Maia Dery.

Focusing on **Interdisciplinary Practice** would have allowed us to gather essays that integrate work across fields traditionally considered separate. Interdisciplinary Practice is a key aspect of the collaborations between

Reni Gower & Jorge Benitez; Markus Vogl & Margarita Benitez; Meena Khalili & Brent Dedas; and interdisciplinarity is the focus of the work examined by Benjamin Benus and Heather Holian.

Community Practice would focus on art that specifically engages the public or works in shared spaces. The essays related to Community Practice are those by Jenny K. Hager; Sheryl Oring; Stephanie Sherman & George Scheer; Wendy DesChene & Jeff Schmuki; Kathryn Shields; and Matt Tullis.

We considered using **Relationship as Form** as a more abstract grouping because it redefines and locates the dynamic force behind creativity within a collaborative paradigm. This section would have focused on art that creates a new genre centered on social bonds as foundational to the point of considering relationships the actual medium. Relationship as Form can be found in the essays by Bradley Bailey; Scott Betz; Cynthia Ling Lee; Linda Brown; Izabel Galliera ; Mark Nystrom; Matt Shelton & Nikolai Noel; and Jack Arthur Wood, Jr.

The notion of “relationship as form” is also connected to socially engaged art practices, which have been theorized by several notable curators and art historians including Nato Thompson in his book *Living as Form*. Creative collaboration entails shifting boundaries of power, position, and identity between domains of knowledge and collaborative participants. For many in the arts and education, collaboration is fundamentally about these shifting boundaries and the new relationships that emerge from them. Whether or not collaboration is the explicit focus of a project, relationships between collaborators—which may include artists, viewers/participants, teachers, students, institutions, and communities—inform the context, meaning and ultimate form of the work.

In the end, we settled on the current organization because we feel these themes are especially relevant for contemporary art practitioners. The formal connections present in the alternative organization are now woven into conceptual groupings. Each section introduction further explores these topics and discusses connections to the essays included in it.

Fear and Risk has become a notably relevant topic for collaboration in the arts, both as a cause and an effect. Art students and professionals must produce results and, in the process, have to recover from failure again and again. In truth, we learn much more from failure than success. This section

introduces both theory and practice about navigating complexity, questioning scientific advancements, incorporating family and friends, maneuvering in public spaces, and developing sustainable, creative life strategies through collaboration.

Shifting Boundaries shakes up traditional disciplinary categorization and hierarchical power structures to create new collaborative structures. Many of the contributors in this section work across disciplines and across cultures, pulling together knowledge in ways that prove enlightening and inspiring. Other authors examine historical and contemporary examples of collaborating across disciplinary, categorical, and cultural boundaries.

Friendship, or social bonds, offers a framework for collaborative art practice that builds on synergies and embraces their positive impact. At times these synergies emerge organically, while at others they are sought out. The essays in this section range from social justice work to community interactions to work inspired by enjoying the company of others and celebrating complimentary talents.

Serendipity represents the more magical and unexpected aspects of collaborative arts practice. Embracing the unknown, opening up institutional limitations, inviting exchange, and harnessing the wind are among the ways that artists find and create new frameworks for creative art practice, research, teaching, and learning.

This collection opens up discussions of reciprocal relationships between educators and students, artists and viewers, researchers and practitioners. It recounts the crossing of boundaries between design and crowd-sourcing, humans and animals, “fine art” and tattoo parlors, science and natural disasters. In addition to recognizing the relationship between social justice and social practice, the authors consider creative exchange, the marketplace, the classroom, the museum, and nature as sources for inspiration and exchange.

The contributors are interested in the liberating implications of redefining creativity using intersections of numerous disciplines and shifting power structures as ways to inform meaning-making. This collection was designed to share stories that might be applicable or relevant to readers’ own classrooms, art practice, or scholarship. As such, it directly appeals to college professors of studio art and design, art history, and art education as well as to artists, scholars, and teachers who work collaboratively. It might

even draw readership from business professionals seeking critical thinkers and creative problem solvers to energize their industries. We hope to inspire conversations about the ways relationships become crucial for construction, reception and display; meaning and power; design, content, and action.

References

- Davidson, Cathy N. 2012. *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*, reprint edition. Penguin Books.
- Thompson, Nato, ed. 2012. *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. New York, NY: Creative Time Books.

Notes

¹ SECAC is the institutional name of a non-profit dedicated to education and research in the visual arts. SECAC provides community for artists, art historians, educators, students, and interested others (many of whom are members) by hosting publications, conferences, and awards, etc. Formed by the letters of the organization's previous acronym (referencing the Southeastern College Art Conference), its name reflects its evolution to an international, rather than a regional, organization and builds on the familiarity and momentum already generated by "SECAC."

PART I:

FEAR AND RISK

SUNNY SPILLANE

WENDY DESCHENE AND JEFF SCHMUKI

HEATHER HARVEY

SCOTT BETZ

MARK DIXON

CHAPTER 1.0

FEAR AND RISK

SUNNY SPILLANE

If making art gives substance to your sense of self, the corresponding fear is that you're not up to the task – that you can't do it, or can't do it well, or can't do it again, or have no talent, or have nothing to say. The line between the artist and his/her work is a fine one at best, and for the artist it feels (quite naturally) like there is no such line. (Bayles and Orland 1993, 13)

We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which, ... [like] the battered VW van of Little Miss Sunshine, no one gets left behind. (Halberstam 2011, 25)

Art, Fear, Failure, and Collaboration

In my struggle to hammer out a framework for this section introduction, my internal script sounded a lot like the above passage from Bayles and Orland's classic *Art and Fear*. As a junior faculty member with a lot to prove and a tenure clock swiftly ticking, it often does feel like the line between myself and my work is very thin, and that I myself – rather than my work – am being evaluated, and with very high stakes. I jumped into this book project gleefully with both feet, bursting with ideas about collaboration and excited to explore them with some of my favorite colleagues and friends. But as often happens, once the project started taking shape and deadlines began approaching, performance pressure set in. Did I have any original insights at all about collaboration? Had I read enough to feel confident theorizing collaboration in different ways? Could we finish this in time to include it in my tenure packet? Would I reveal myself, through my labored writing and pedestrian thinking, to be a fraud? These kinds of fears reflect traditional notions of creativity as an

individual pursuit, in which success or failure, defined within narrow boundaries, is a measure of self-worth. “For many people, that alone is enough to prevent their ever getting started at all” (Bayles and Orland 1993, 13).

But what might change if rather than fearing failure, I instead began the writing process by accepting that I have already failed, at least by some traditional measures? This book, in fact, is not a testament to anyone’s individual genius. Rather, it situates creativity within collaborative relationships, including those between the authors and editors of this volume, and what we made together is greater than the sum of its parts. This characterization of creativity – and orientation to failure – is captured in the second quote above, from Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*. Here, creativity is envisioned as a collaborative endeavor that begins with failure and moves forward together into uncharted territory where new meanings are made. In this view, failure is presumed instead of feared, which allows it to be conceptualized as a generative space of creative freedom and possibility, while collaboration provides the social support necessary to mitigate risk and overcome individual fears.

In a section titled “Fear and Risk” readers might reasonably expect the authors grouped under this theme to explore our performance anxieties and self-doubts and offer insights about how we navigate them (as in *Art and Fear*). However, the authors in this section describe fears that go far beyond failure. Some of these include: career-related fears about how collaborative work might be evaluated for tenure and promotion by traditional measures that privilege individual authorship; fears for our students and a powerful sense of responsibility to teach in ways that are responsive to their needs and prepare them for the world beyond college; fears of doing nothing to instigate social change in the face of serious environmental threats and grave social inequities; fears of stagnation and boredom as artists and teachers if we keep doing the same things in the same ways; and fears of compartmentalizing our lives and disconnecting from our authentic selves if we don’t do the work that honors our consciences and our spirits.

Risk and Happiness

In Barbara Bradley Hagerty’s recent National Public Radio series “Stuck in the Middle: Work, Health and Happiness at Midlife” her research on midlife revealed that unhappiness at work is strongly related to risk

aversion (Hagerty 2016). According to Hagerty, taking measured risks in order to advance in our careers, to keep learning and growing, and to introduce novelty, increases our satisfaction and happiness. Additionally, her research indicated that happiness was associated with warm relationships. If this is the case, it makes sense that for the authors in this section, although collaboration sometimes entails risk, it also enables risk, building warm, supportive relationships through the process of solving problems together.

All of the authors in this section describe ways that collaboration supports us in taking risks and helps us overcome fears about life, career, creative practice, and teaching. We collaborate in order to reach higher in our teaching and creative practices, to push beyond the limits of what we currently know and are able to do. When we get stuck, we are energized by the dynamic uncertainty of collaboration and open to the ways it intervenes and changes the direction of our work. Many of us also collaborate when we realize we can't get to where we want to go by working alone. We may not always know *where* we want to go – we've likely started from a place of failure, as in Halberstam's example of Little Miss Sunshine - but we know we're heading in the wrong direction and we need a change.

The authors in this section acknowledge a variety of risks involved in collaboration, ranging from unpredictable creative outcomes to uncomfortable relationships with collaborators to outright failure. However, we also know that making gains in our work requires taking risks, and that it is a bigger risk to not grow than it is to fail and shift direction. Although collaboration itself may sometimes seem risky, collaboration solved as many problems as it created for these authors, including: shifting the direction of established or habitual creative practice in fruitful ways when we were “stuck;” facilitating integration of previously compartmentalized areas of our lives and work – family, creative practice, teaching, spiritual practice, activism – that we may have feared to bring into the professional arena because of perceived stigmas attached to them; providing a social support system that sustained and motivated the artists to persist in creating “risky” new work.

Teaching and Accountability

“Studying standard sensible strategies and well-worn paths is problematic, and arguably the dumbest way to get to where we are trying to go. It is far better, and more energizing and ethical, to stay open to new approaches,

pivot towards the particularities of a given class or student, take risks, and welcome occasional failure.” (Heather Harvey)

In the quote above from Heather Harvey’s essay in this section, she describes the absurd situation of her institution striving for game-changing student achievement in scholarship and creative activity – what she terms “outliers” – while requiring that faculty structure their courses around predetermined student learning outcomes measured with standardized rubrics. This culture of teaching accountability has begun trickling up to the university context from K-12 education (Lederman 2013). Indeed the state university system in North Carolina, where I am employed, recently appointed Margaret Spellings, a chief proponent of No Child Left Behind (2001) and Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, as President of the UNC System. This attitude toward assessment of student learning and achievement, as Harvey describes so cogently, can be actively antithetical to meaningful teaching and learning in the arts, where, arguably, successfully meeting a predetermined outcome misses the point.

Artists and educators have long considered failure to be a natural part of learning and growth, for ourselves and our students, especially in such complex learning processes as those involved in becoming an artist and/or a teacher (Dweck 2006; Hanawalt 2015; Hyatt 2015; Le Feuvre 2010; Smith and Henricksen 2016; Spillane 2015; Taylor and Bastos 2008). Against this backdrop of high-stakes accountability, however, it can be challenging for all of us to embrace failure and take risks that are necessary to the continued development of our teaching and creative practices. When graduation, career, reappointment, and tenure are on the line, art and education can be high stakes endeavors in which failure is not an option.

Several of the authors in this section devote a lot of attention to the ways collaboration informs their teaching practices. For many of us, we teach collaboration for the same reasons we collaborate in our professional practices – to push students out of their comfort zones, to facilitate integrating previously compartmentalized areas of their personal lives and academic work, and to provide social support for doing “risky” new work. Although most of us are held accountable for demonstrating student learning outcomes, we also hold ourselves accountable for teaching responsively and for preparing students to be resourceful, resilient, and responsible.

Modeling resourcefulness and resiliency, Heather Harvey describes adjusting to some of the constraints of teaching at her institution (funding,