2-2010

Out of thin air: collaborative and solo work = 憑空而來: 合作及個人畫展

Carol ARCHER
Lingnan University, Hong Kong, carcher@ln.edu.hk

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.ln.edu.hk/vs_faculty_work
Part of the Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Visual Studies Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ Lingnan University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Expression through Art: Visual Studies Faculty by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Lingnan University.
out of thin air

collaborative and solo work

C A R O L A R C H E R

Lingnan University
statement

Out of Thin Air is a proud first in two respects for the new Visual Studies Department at Lingnan University. The first Lingnan exhibition of work by a full-time member of the Visual Studies Department, Out of Thin Air also inaugurates our ‘traveling exhibitions’ agreement with Sun Yat Sen University in Guangzhou.

An artistic exploration of Carol Archer’s scholarly engagement with concepts of collaborative creativity, the Reciprocal Interference works exemplify the Department’s commitment to ‘research expression’, to the idea of art-making as a form of probing and systematic conceptual thinking. Setting aside a conception of the artist as a solitary figure who finds inspiration primarily through inwardness, the Reciprocal Interference project clearly demonstrates that significant creative gains flow from collaboration. Emphasizing as they do collaboration over individualistic or competitive pursuits, the works resonate with the ethos that defines Visual Studies at Lingnan. Time with the Sky is also a series that points to concerns that are central to the Visual Studies Department’s efforts. Conveying a sense of being both moved by nature and immersed in it, the Time with the Sky series contributes, again as an instance of ‘research expression’, to one of the Department’s core research areas, that of environmental aesthetics.

Conceptually powerful and rewarding, Carol Archer’s works are not, however, ultimately reducible to philosophical arguments or positions, for Out of Thin Air is very much the work of a practitioner who embraces art as thinking, but also art as craft-based practice, as technique.

Mette Hjort
Chair Professor and Head
Department of Visual Studies, Lingnan

Exhibition Dates
27 Feb – 28 March, 2010
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

30 April – 13 May, 2010
Sun Yat Sen University, Guangzhou
out of thin air

collaborative and solo work

For Sue Taylor, Johanna Trainor, Mary Grehan, Sue Rawlinson, Even Mak and Christopher (Kit) Kelen, inspiring collaborators and good friends.
The works in this exhibition are part of two larger series of work, both of which are ongoing: the Reciprocal Interference project and Time with the Sky. The Reciprocal Interference project consists of two-person collaborative works by Carol Archer and artist-friends Sue Rawlinson, Sue Taylor, Johanna Training (Australia), Mary Grehan (Ireland) and Even Mak (Hong Kong). The Time with the Sky series of charcoal and watercolour drawings was begun during Archer’s residency at Bundanon, Australia in July 2009. Australian artist Arthur Boyd and his family gave their home, a splendid property on the banks of the Shoalhaven River, to benefit local and international artists working across the range of arts disciplines. The Time with the Sky series of charcoal and watercolour drawings was begun during Archer’s residency at Bundanon, Australia in July 2009. Australian artist Arthur Boyd and his family gave their home, a splendid property on the banks of the Shoalhaven River, to benefit local and international artists working across the range of arts disciplines. The Time with the Sky drawings show sky framed by the uppermost branches of trees. Solo works, these pictures are destined to contribute to a cross-disciplinary collaboration with poet Christopher (Kit) Kelen. Both series of work came out of thin air. Reciprocal Interference works-in-progress were air-mailed by collaborating partners in Hong Kong, Macao, Australia and Ireland. The Time with the Sky works are inspired by the big Australian sky, and the eucalypts that stretch up toward it. But the exhibition title Out of Thin Air is also ironically intended, because seemingly unpredictable aspects of the two series are in fact the result of sustained thought and effort, dialogue, and conducive circumstances. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the two series in the Out of Thin Air exhibition, discussing how they came into being, and the productive synergy between these art practices and more theoretically-oriented forms of research.

A little history may help to introduce Reciprocal Interference. In 2005, when Sue Rawlinson was visiting Macao, we had a conversation about our respective art practices. During this discussion I described to Sue a work of art that I was currently researching. Entitled Underground (1994-5), the piece is a mixed media work on paper by the South African Amsterdam-based painter Marlene Dumas and her (then) 5-year-old daughter Helena. It consists of twenty eight unframed panels, each depicting a close-up representation of a face, which are arranged in a grid on the gallery wall. When I first saw Underground in London’s Tate Gallery in 1996, I was struck by its disjunctive appearance. Almost all of the panels contain two radically different styles of mark-making. Helena’s bold rainbow-coloured palette jars against her mother’s restrained black and white ink painting. In order to give Helena something to do while Dumas got on with her own work, she gave Helena a stack of her ‘failures.’ The Tate catalogue cites the artist’s account of what followed:

Helena decorated, improved and worked on my black and white drawings, which she found boring, with colour. ‘It was her underground.’ She worked against me. I allowed her to play with my drawings so I could do other work. This was not set up as an art project in the first place. She ‘recast’ my original models into her own stories. One was kidnapped, she said, and one walked into a horse.

My research on Underground explored its transgressive features and the senses in which the work instantiates a kind of artistic gift-exchange. As visual art practitioners, however, what Sue Rawlinson and I found inspiring about Underground was its apparent playfulness: it models a way of working without thinking or planning too much. We were also struck by the way the series functioned to ‘rehabilitate’ failed or uncompleted works, and how such a process might amount to a kind of mutual encouragement and validation. Inspired by Underground, we resolved to create a series of small pieces together, mailing works-in-progress between Macao and Australia.

A few rules for the collaboration were established from the outset. It was agreed that subject matter and medium would be kept open. We decided not to communicate verbally about our intentions for works we had started, nor to send each other accompanying messages, directions or titles. A consistent format was chosen—A4-sized panels are an easy size to mail and to scan. We agreed to send each other 5 pictures at a time, in hopes that at least one of the five ‘starts’ might prove particularly engaging for the other artist. The rules for the collaboration also involved a ‘stopping rule’ and a decision regarding who would own the completed works. It was agreed that the person...
who started the work would be the one to declare it finished. This meant a picture could go back and forth many times—indeed some went back and forth over a period of years—before it was decided it was finished. It was also agreed that the originator of a piece would become its eventual owner. Of the aforementioned rules, the most important was the one concerning the absence of accompanying instructions. The thinking here was that the project was to be a process of visual communication, with the fostering playful exchange taking precedence over the realisation of any explicit artistic intentions.

In early 2006, I wrote to Sue Taylor, Johanna Trainor, Even Mak and Mary Grehan to see if they’d be interested in working with me in a similar manner. I initiated these new collaborations by citing the existing work being done with Sue Rawlinson. Irish artist Mary Grehan and I chose to follow the ‘rules’ outlined above, while some other artist-pairs modified them. For example, Hong Kong artist Even Mak and I, because of our geographic proximity, chose on occasion to work simultaneously while the Reciprocal Interference works produced in collaboration with Johanna Trainor, entailed the latter working photographically and digitally to finish scanned watercolour and mixed media ‘starts’ that I sent to her. And at a certain point in the collaboration with Sue Taylor, we recognised that our best pieces were the ones involving only ‘two goes’, so we adopted a procedure whereby we each completed the other artist’s ‘starts’. The most recent phase of the Reciprocal Interference collaboration with Sue Taylor involves the production of collaborative as well as solo postcards, incorporating our addresses, postmarks and stamps.

The title of the project was inspired by a passage from Henri Bergson’s essay ‘Laughter’. In this essay Bergson identifies a number of dynamics through which humor is generated. One of these he calls ‘reciprocal interference’. In a footnote to the essay Bergson notes that the term ‘interference’ should be understood as it is in optics, to mean ‘the partial superposition and neutralisation, by each other, of two series of light-waves’. He goes on to describe how a situation ‘will invariably be comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.’ 4 We felt that this was an apt title for our project. Our aim was not explicitly to produce comic works, although there was definitely a comic aspect to the process of surprising each other by the additions and changes we made to each other’s works. The main reason for choosing this title had to do with the fact that, like the comic situation identified by Bergson, the collaborative works in our project each bring together two different kinds of subject matter and/or style, so that interpretation often becomes a matter of negotiating the two. Like Bergson’s definition of a joke, when these two ‘waves’ meet, the resulting work often comes as a surprise. Whatever one’s intentions had been, they may be completely overturned by the other artist. The ‘interference’ that is a key part of this artistic project isn’t just about any ideas one might have had about the meaning of the work one had started. It covers the most basic of details. One might intend a work to have a certain orientation, for example, but it might end up another way around, changing from portrait format to landscape.

It is in this sense that the resulting works appear to have come out of thin air rather than as the result of any conscious intention or plan. However, as I hope to have shown, planning and theoretical research actually played a significant part in the development of these pictures. Conversely, the questions and insights generated by first-hand experience of creative collaboration have been vital for my background research on the topic of contemporary artistic collaboration. ‘Hands-on’ experience allows me to formulate research questions of a kind that might not occur to the non-practitioner.

A series of blogs document the work-in-progress of the five artist-pairs, all of which are accessible through a blog entitled ‘About Reciprocal Interference’. 5
The *Time with the Sky* series resulted, in a very real sense, from the generosity of Australian artist Arthur Boyd and his family. The privilege of a residency at the rural retreat of Bundanon on the New South Wales South Coast, provided me with dedicated time and space for creative work. Also resident at Bundanon during July 2009 was Christopher (Kit) Kelen. While the two of us began working on parallel projects, we soon recognized important points of intersection, not least of which was our shared interest in representing the Bundanon environment in a manner that took into account our presence in it.

*Time with the Sky* is a series of drawings in its own right. And it is a twelve part poem by Kit Kelen. The two are also intended to be read together, as a collaborative whole. Throughout the poem, there is a persistent tension between the notion of the natural world as representation and as autonomous entity. What connection is there between our ‘reading’ of the world and the way it actually is? Is this drawing and poetry engendered through specific experiences of viewing and reading? The aim of the image-and-text work is not to answer but to keep such questions open. Here is a sample from the seventh section of the draft poem:

```
glimpse of the infinite
and tribute too
we offer all our skill for this
to take the heart along
its own way
an opening

as if this were writing
which turns
forgets itself

goes on

how fine
that the eye goes with it
and the eye is a boomerang too
it falls to mold like leaf
never gives up the ghost

and lower still the camera
casts and catches
this for you
```

In these lines of the poetic work-in-progress, attention is drawn to the reciprocity between the textual and the visual, between subject and object, between the world ‘out there’ and the world as representation. The poem is a highly visual text and the drawings—composed of innumerable marks—have a script-like quality. In this way text and image partake of each other’s materiality and method; hence their connection and their concerted demand to be read each in the other’s terms. Both the drawings and poem direct the viewer’s and reader’s attention to the openness of the sky, to the act of simply looking up and out of the everyday. These works share with their audience the meditative and healing practice of spending time with the sky.

*Out of Thin Air* brings together two ongoing series of work, both of which foreground collaborative creative processes. Each series has evolved through conversations that take up questions artistic, literary and scholarly in nature. Without the generosity, trust and respect of my many collaborators, none of the work presented here would have been possible.

---

3. I am borrowing this term from Paisley Livingston. See ‘When a Work is Finished: A Response to Darren Hudson Hick,’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, vol. 66, no. 4 (2008), 394.
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Sue Taylor and Carol Archer 8
2009
watercolour, ink and postage stamps on paper
15 x 21cm
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Archer to Taylor
2009
watercolour, ink and stamps on paper
approx. 11.5 x 17.5cm

Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Taylor to Archer
2009
watercolour, ink and stamps on paper
approx. 11 x 16cm
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Sue Taylor and Carol Archer 2
2006
mixed media on paper
29.8 x 21cm.
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Johanna Trainor and Carol Archer 4
2008
photomedia
21 x 29.8 cm.
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Johanna Trainor and Carol Archer 3
2008
photomedia
21 x 29.8cm.
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Mary Grehan and Carol Archer 5
2005
ink and watercolour on paper
21 x 29.8cm.
Reciprocal Interference / 互涉
Sue Rawlinson and Carol Archer 7
2006
mixed media on paper
29.8 x 21cm.
Time with the Sky / 與天共度的時光 #1

Carol Archer
2009
charcoal on paper
76.5 x 57.5 cm
Time with the Sky / 與天共度的時光 #5
Carol Archer
2010
charcoal, pastel and watercolour on paper
76.5 x 57.5 cm
Time with the Sky / 與天共度的時光 #7

Carol Archer
2009
charcoal and watercolour on paper
76.5 x 57.5 cm
Time with the Sky / 與天共度的時光 #6
Carol Archer
2009
charcoal on paper
76.5 x 57.5 cm
Time with the Sky / 與天共度的時光 #9
Carol Archer
2010
charcoal on paper
76.5 x 57.5 cm
EXHIBITIONS OF SOLO AND COLLABORATIVE WORK

2009  Near and Far and Mostly Macao: Carol Archer and Christopher Kelen, University of Macau Library Gallery, Macao

2008  Reciprocal Interference: A Collaborative Art Project (collaborative works with Sue Rawlinson, Even Mak, Sue Taylor, Mary Grehan, Johanna Tranor), Podspace, Newcastle, Australia

2007  Knot, Touch, Trace, Creative Macau, Macao Cultural Centre, Macao

2006  Work of Macao Hands, University Gallery, University of Macau Library, Macao

2001  Sleep to Dream/Shui Yi Meng (image/text collaboration with Kit Kelen), Montblanc and Nokia Galleries, Fringe Club, Hong Kong

2000  Tai Mo Shan/Big Hat Mountain (image/poetry collaboration with Kit Kelen), Montblanc Gallery, Fringe Club, Central, Hong Kong

2000  Wanchai (photomedia/poetry collaboration with Kit Kelen), 41 Staunton St, Hong Kong

1998  Skin to Work, Maling Gallery, Casula Powerhouse, Casula, N.S.W., Australia

1997  Skinworks, Space YZ, University of Western Sydney, Kingswood, N.S.W., Australia

1997  Nothing so Deep, Vacant Shopfront Art Project, Newcastle, Australia

1996  Between Skins, Manning Regional Art Gallery, Taree, N.S.W., Australia

1996  Body of Work, From Heaven to Hell Cultural Institute, Rome, Italy

And over 30 group exhibitions in Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Macao and China

special thanks

Mette Hjort, Sophia Law, Raphael de Clercq, Zoie So, Kaye Wong, Joyce Tong, Celia Ko, Frederick Nesta, Andrew Liu, the extended Murchie and Kelen families, Cheng Huanwen, Jian-Min Wang, Song Zijiang (Chris), Fan Xing (Iris), Tam Hio Man (Hilda), Baily Chan Yau Wai (photography) and Lai Wing Chung Grey (catalogue design).

I am grateful to Lingnan University for the grant that allowed the production of this catalogue, to the Bundanon Trust (Australia) for the 2009 artist’s residency that facilitated the Time with the Sky series, and to the School of Communication and Design at Sun Yat Sen University, Guangzhou, for co-hosting this exhibition.
out of thin air

collaborative and solo work

C A R O L A R C H E R

Lingnan University

憑空而來
合作及個人畫展

区励志