

The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration

Stephen Wright

*Everything we are and everything we have
is a gift and has to be given away in turn.*

Léon Bourgeois

What could be more fulfilling, more invigorating than the public happiness experienced in collective action? Yet what could be more difficult to pursue over time than genuinely cooperative labour, to such an extent that it seems to constitute a veritable state of exception? Why is it that collaboration – in art as elsewhere – seems to be of such *delicate essence*? Those familiar with French anthropology may well recognise in those two words, which I have embedded in this essay's title, the signature of Marcel Mauss and his understanding of the *délicate essence de la cité*.¹ Indeed, it is Mauss's inspiring work on the paradox of the gift that has provided the general theoretical underpinnings for the following reflection on the paradoxes of artistic collaboration. For it is in light of Mauss's insights that we want to consider how, when, and with whom collaboration is possible, and indeed why, ultimately, we collaborate at all. Consider the following:

In order to progress, people have to work together; and in the course of their collaboration, they gradually become aware of an identification in their relationships whose initial diversity was precisely what made their collaboration fruitful and necessary.²

What interests me in this remark by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is less the crypto-Hegelian logic of identity which informs it (whereby initial difference is necessarily eroded through association) than three ideas which are implicit to it, and which will structure what I have to say here: first that collaboration emerges and flourishes under certain sets of circumstances; second that it is diversity, rather than commonality or similarity, which makes collaboration 'fruitful and necessary'; and third – and on this point, I profoundly disagree with Lévi-Strauss's utilitarian perspective, though I think it underlies most

1. 'At the risk of appearing old-fashioned and rehashing commonplaces,' wrote Mauss, 'we clearly propose to come back to the old Greek and Latin concepts of *caritas* ... of that necessary "friendship", of that "community", which are the delicate essence of the city.' Marcel Mauss, *Écrits politiques*, Fayard, Paris, 1997.
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale deux*, Plon, Paris, 1973, p 420.

contemporary political theory and seems virtually self-evident to most artists – that collaboration is founded upon *mutual interest*. This myopic identification of utilitarian reason and free association – whereby otherwise mutually indifferent individuals interact on the basis of calculated reciprocal gain – seems all too reminiscent of contemporary political liberalism.

Collaborative art practices emerge and flourish under specific art-historical circumstances. For one thing, as long as art is conceived as the production of object-based works, or as a process-based activity, intersubjectivity and interaction come into play primarily in the sphere of reception, and generally prove to be a stumbling block to art production. Of course, certain forms of collaboration have always characterised artistic activity, both between artists, and, outside the times and spaces validated by art, between artists and people from other walks of life. But because the symbolic economy of recognition that characterises the artworld is highly competitive, and based on the strategic exploitation of disparities in talent and social capital, permanent risk management, acceptance of and even insistence upon non-monetary remuneration and so on, sincere attempts at collaboration are easily thwarted. This is all the more the case in so far as the art economy is based on the exchange of object-based artworks. So long as the physical and social architecture of art-specific spaces remains the dominant reference for art practice, co-authorship can only be perceived as a hindrance to the sort of possessive individualism underpinning authorship. Intersubjective encounter between artists, as well as between artistic creativity and other more diffuse forms of creativity, tends to be strategic rather than cooperative; deceit and bluff tend to be the rule, and teamwork the exception. The symbolic economy of art mirrors that of the general economy.

The situation is at least marginally different when, through the refusal of the commodified artwork and/or the means–ends rationality underlying it, artists prefer more open-ended process-based work. Typically in such work, meaning is process immanent, and the process itself is subordinated to no extrinsic finality and so engenders no object-based work. But in and of itself, this dis-operative turn – characteristic of much of the art production of the past few years – is not really any more conducive to genuinely collaborative practices than object-based art. For to believe that the self-interest that inhibits collaborative endeavour is embedded in artworks or even art institutions alone is to fall victim to a fallacy of misplaced concreteness; and more generally, it is to try and apprehend art by erroneously attributing artistic properties to some concrete manifestation of art (whether artworks or their corollaries, art-processes). The problem here is embedded in ART-making itself, for art is not merely a *category*; it is, or rather has become in twentieth-century usage, a *performative*. As such, *it makes things happen*, romantic things, and generates endless amounts of the most extravagant sorts of claims, using its institutions to lend them not only a largely unchallenged semblance of truth but all the trustworthiness of convention. And by the same token, it *prevents* things from happening – including meaningful collaboration. The intellectually and aesthetically impoverished practices broadly (and somewhat slackly) known, thanks to Nicolas Bourriaud, as ‘relational aesthetics’,³ are a case in point: artists make forays into the outside world, ‘propose’ (as artworlders like to say) usually very

3. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du réel, Dijon, 2004.

contrived services to people who never asked for them, or rope them into some frivolous interaction, then expropriate as the material for their work whatever minimal labour they have managed to extract from these more or less unwitting participants (whom they sometimes have the gall to describe as ‘co-authors’). In so doing, they end up reproducing within the symbolic economy of art the sort of class-based relations of expropriation that Marx saw at work in the general economy: on the one hand, those who hold the symbolic capital (the artists), and on the other, those whose labour (such as it is) are used to foster the accumulation of more capital. And this is precisely what is usually passed off as ‘collaboration’ – making cynical mockery of the term – not just by such artists as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Maurizio Cattelan and all those whose names figure in all the almanacs of relational aesthetics, but by countless others besides.

However, I would not want my criticism to be mistaken for out-of-hand dismissal. Apologists of the artworld – a worldly bunch if ever there were – are often paradoxically ‘worldless’, to use a term coined by Edward Said, by which he meant inattentive to the circumstances that press upon artworks, artists, and viewers alike. But artists themselves, to be fair, are part of a sort of community of inquiry. For though I am loath to cut these mainstream relational practices too much slack, it is true that art practices are invariably embedded with more reflexive competencies and perceptions than first meets the eye – which is why even misguided practices have a lot to offer. The question is how to channel those competencies and perceptions beneficially into collaborative endeavours. Mainstream contemporary art is about proposing decoded and recoded experimental models of inter-subjective interaction. To the extent that these models of social interaction merely seem to reconfigure and repeat dominant ideology, the artists producing them are not autonomous, and their models are by no means ‘self-governing’: indeed, ‘models’ inherently tend to ‘modelise’ rather than autonomise behaviour, urging people to conform to, and eventually identify with, the dominant model.⁴ When they are aware – or made aware – of this, they will usually resort to the claim that they are using irony, always the last-ditch claim of individualism in free fall, stripped of moral and even intellectual meaning. Art, in short, is the chief obstacle to artistic collaboration.

COMPLEMENTARY DIVERSITY

One might say: What could be more normal than the fact that artists produce art? After all, they are just doing their job, and there seems to be no stopping them. Besides, who would want to stop them? So they go on and on making art – adding to that constantly growing category of objects obeying that description. What is more unusual, and far more interesting, is when artists do not do art. Or, at any rate, when they do not claim that whatever it is they are doing is, in fact, art – when they inject their artistic aptitudes and perceptual *habitus* into the general symbolic economy of the real. For in the wake of the radical deskilling that has characterised art practices over the past decades, art can now be seen – and is seen, at least implicitly – as a specific set of competencies,

4. By ‘autonomous’ or ‘self-governing’, I am referring to a form of collective life that social actors (including artists) adopt for themselves when they cease to conform to dominant models of organisation; it refers in this respect to an alternative mode of organisation outside instituted knowledge.

skills, aptitudes, and perceptions that over its long history it has had the opportunity to hone to a very sophisticated level. And which can be fruitfully combined with other competencies specific to other realms of human activity. Rather than recycling the art-related skills and perceptions back into the symbolic economy of art, a growing number of artists are now filtering them into other economies and, in a gesture of extra-territorial reciprocity, opening up a space within the symbolic economy of art to other practices.

The most radical shift implied by art understood in terms of its specific competencies, rather than in terms of its specific performances, is its *impaired visibility as art*. Outside the legitimising framework of the artworld, the deployment of artistic competencies simply *does not generate art*. They are visible, and they contribute to enhanced perception of what is overlooked, but not necessarily as art. (I am thinking here of the potential of Jochen Gerz's collaborative, 'publicly authored' monuments, which initiate a subtle, art-informed dialectic of visibility and invisibility.)⁵ Art-related initiatives on the threshold between fiction and documentary use their wavering visibility as art heuristically. I am thinking here of the online Atlas Group, which invites artists and non-artists, and indeed fictional and non-fictional collaborators, to participate in research projects into the history of the civil wars in Lebanon.⁶ The idea is that were the real to receive the sort of sustained and attentive gaze that artworks tend to enjoy, justice would not be poorly served. In such works, ART and the holy trinity upon which it is founded – the Author, the Artwork, the Public – all manifestations of oneness and unicity, are not struck down but rather assimilated into collaboration, and so disappear as such.

What exactly do I mean by *competence*? I take the term from Chomskyan linguistics, but am using it in a broader, more all-inclusive sense to cover everything from technical to procedural to perceptual skills. For Chomsky, competence is the full set of possibilities conferred on a speaker of a natural language by the mere fact – and the mere fact alone – that he or she masters that language (competence to construct, recognise, interpret, and detect sentences as being correct, incorrect, meaningful, meaningless). Whereas with respect to artistic competencies, I see no reason not to extend the term to the pragmatics of the situation (ability to anticipate effects, relying on the context to complete the meaning, always to see content in terms of form, etc), which may seem (but are not, I think) independent from artistic activity. Like Chomsky, I see *competence* as opposed to *performance*, understood as the actual manifestation of competence, and am concerned that modernity has reduced art to its performative dimension alone.

What competencies, aptitudes, and perceptual *habitus* can artists contribute to collaborative endeavours? François Deck has developed game-related models for contributing autonomising skills to collaborative processes, fostering the autonomisation of citizen-participants, in a practice that at once prefigures and prepares for the sort of civic associationism or collaboration that I have in mind. In Bureau d'études' collaborations with homeless people's groups in Brussels, with whom they squatted in the defunct Somalian Embassy, proclaiming it a 'Universal Embassy',⁸ or @TMark's and The Yes Men's collaborations with the counter-globalisation movement, one finds cases in point of what

5. See in this volume, Jochen Gerz, 'Toward Public Authorship'.
6. See the group's website: www.theatlasgroup.org
7. See in this volume, François Deck, 'Reciprocal Expertise'.
8. The action itself was part of the various immigrant groups' broader strategy-shift away from purely legal demands to more a proactive form of *creating* rights. Renamed the 'Universal Embassy', the site now houses some twenty immigrants. On Bureau d'études, see their website: www.utangente.fr.st, and in this volume, 'Resymbolizing Machines'.

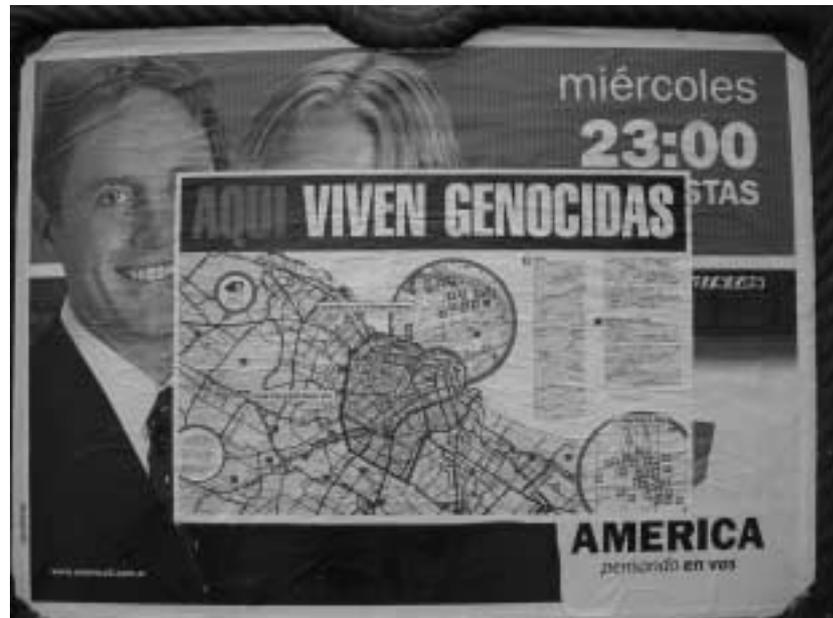
François Deck calls competence-crossing. But these actions are not opportunities for artists to weasel their way into collaborative processes in order to reclaim them for their own artistic glory. The point is rather to put their artistic know-how at the disposal of a collective project, without forsaking their own autonomy; to find a way to compound complementary skills, one partner's inabilities complementing the abilities of the other. For whereas the creative freedom of social movements is often hindered by an attitude based on demand and disciplined protest – which artists invariably find off-putting – these movements are highly proficient in terms of collective action. Among artists, on the other hand, one often finds an inverse relation of proficiencies: a highly developed sense of individual autonomy (it is the artist, after all, who, with a properly sovereign gesture, decrees his or her work to be finished), but which is liable to turn into a preemptory decisionism thwarting genuine team playing.

THE CASE OF ARGENTINA

Take the case of ongoing collaboration between artists and social movements in Argentina. Despite the economic crisis, a fruitful exchange of competencies has proven possible, not only in terms of associating complementary technical skills, but in the expanded sense I have been



These maps indicate the names and addresses of the perpetrators of the genocide carried out during the dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, who have been *escrached* – that is, whose impunity and otherwise unnoticed presence in Buenos Aires neighborhoods has been brought to light through collective action, initiated by such groups as HIJOS and the Mesa de Escrache Popular. The maps are pasted up around the city every 24 March, on the anniversary of the coup d'état. Maps designed and produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC), Buenos Aires, 2003. Photo courtesy of GAC.



describing, in the interest of fostering local participatory democracy, and above all working toward the constitution of a people's social memory in the face of the ongoing impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of the genocide of Argentine civil society during the years of the dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. Let us consider two examples.

The first is that of the Taller Popular de Serigrafía (People's silk-screening workshop), created in Buenos Aires, in the midst of the December 2001 economic collapse, to provide artistic tools to popular movements – mainly the open-democracy assemblies – that emerged after the crisis, working to enhance the visual aspects of demonstrations through the production and printing of T-shirts and posters. The formal qualities of the finished products notwithstanding, of fundamental interest here is the mode of cooperation that the group has brought into play. The collective itself was founded by a group of artists who felt the need for public participation, who wanted to break away from the isolation of their individual studios and production to 'go out into the streets' – less for artistic than for civic reasons. Inasmuch as the group's members all continue their own artistic practice alongside their group activities, they are not concerned with laying claim to the authorship of the symbols produced in conjunction with the groups with whom they work. The point is not for the artists to dictate the form and content of the silk-screens they produce, but rather to insist on the indivisible link between form and content in art-related processes, and to take part in production without necessarily controlling it. However, the considerable overlap between the political and the artistic – so often understood as autonomous fields – inevitably leads to paradoxes. The group was invited to the Venice Biennale (an apogee of artistic event) in 2003 as a group of *activists*, and was then subsequently invited to the World Social Forum (a political event par excellence) in Mumbai in January 2004 as an *artists'* collective. Such confusions tend to disappear, once art is

considered as a set of competencies to inject into processes that are not inventoried as artistic, rather than a set of performances to be appreciated in their own right.

Though the conjuncture in Argentina in the late 1990s was in many ways propitious to this and other such initiatives, it is important to note that there are historical antecedents deeply rooted in Argentine political and artistic culture. Foremost among them are the radical experiments of Tucumán Arde, the Argentine avant-garde group of artists active in the 1960s, who used their skills, tools, and means of production to document the appalling conditions of the sugar-plant workers in northern Argentina's Tucumán province, and more broadly to create an 'informational circuit' to demonstrate media distortion of the situation. They established concrete means in keeping with their expressed 'necessity of having their work transferred to other (non-art) contexts', showing their films and documentation at the General Confederation of Labour of the Argentinians in Rosario and Buenos Aires.⁹ However, important as it is to acknowledge certain lines of historical continuity between the 1960s and today, it is no less important to single out at least one key rupture point. Whereas Tucumán Arde could still subscribe to art's utopian dimension, seeing art as a gauge of social change, today's artists' collectives who are using their competencies to transform Argentine civil society harbour no illusions in this respect. They recognise that, generally speaking, political gestures made in the artworld alone are at best ineffectual in the political sphere, where they go unnoticed, and are oftentimes thoroughly counterproductive exercises in energy absorption. By this I do not mean to imply that Tucumán Arde was deluded about the symbolic efficacy of the artworld; the fact is, however, that the historical conditions of censorship have significantly changed since then: at the time, it was possible to use art as an alternative space *outside* the dominant order of ideology production – not a transcendently outside space in their case, but one grounded in collaboration with labour organising – where media techniques could be appropriated to challenge the dominant order. This is a role that 'art' and its 'world', permeated by the same values as managerial capitalism, can no longer conceivably play.

Which brings us to our second example, the Grupo de Arte Callejero,⁸ or GAC, a collective founded in 1997 in Buenos Aires, currently made up of eight members, some of whom have formal artistic training, while others are biologists or graphic designers. Though the GAC is slowly becoming visible on the radar screens of cutting-edge curators, the group rarely works in art-referenced spaces in Buenos Aires, but rather in situations of public participation, using its graphic-design and art-related competencies to foster not the public consumption but the public production of signs. Over the past few years, the GAC has worked with the steering committee of the HIJOS movement (founded by the children of those who 'disappeared' under the military dictatorship) in organising public actions with the objective of drawing attention to the ongoing presence in Buenos Aires' residential neighbourhoods of those who, in one capacity or another, took part in the criminal activities of the military government. These actions, highly specific to the Argentine context, and developed by HIJOS in 1995, are known as '*escraches*'.⁹ An *escrache* is a collective performance in which memory and knowledge are inseparable from the production of form. The point

9. See Ana Longoni's indispensable historical overview, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde. Vanguardia artística y política en el '68 argentino*, El Cielo por Asalto, Buenos Aires, 2000.

10. 'Street Art Group'. See their website: www.gacgrupo.tripod.com.ar

11. See, for a clear description of an '*escrache*', www.lavaca.org/notas/nota327.shtml



The Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) produces street signs for use in *escraches*. Conceived as a response to a lack of institutional justice, *escraches* are a collective process of producing social memory. By denouncing perpetrators of crimes against civil society – from military leaders and torturers to civilians who profited from the dictatorship – they seek to reveal the mechanisms that allowed the dictatorship to exist, and to prevent its re-emergence. In these images, they prepare the *escrache* of Luis Juan Donocik, in Buenos Aires, 2003. All photos courtesy of GAC.

is not so much to demand that the perpetrators of the genocide and political repression – not carried out only by a handful of officers and their henchmen but requiring an extensive network of profiteers from all walks of life – be brought to trial, nor certainly to lynch them in a further miscarriage of justice, but to shed light on the role they played and their ongoing impunity, in order to constitute a sort of social memory and a popular understanding at the neighbourhood level of how the dictatorship actually functioned, so as to prevent its re-emergence. To this end, the GAC has developed a full array of tools – street signs indicating the location of clandestine detention centres, city maps showing the addresses of the perpetrators of repression – that the group deploys itself and makes available to others.

The GAC provides a particularly interesting case study because it challenges art's ability to function outside the world of art, without giving up its constitutively creative attitude – even if that sometimes means turning down 'generous' offers from art institutions, always eager to instrumentalise such projects in order to recuperate an interdisciplinary practice at no social cost to itself. The group's situation is precarious inasmuch as its practice cannot fail to tantalise the institution (which is in itself not a bad thing, and affords the GAC and its partners a certain visibility). But this very fact forces it to exercise great vigilance if the intentions of its partners are not to be betrayed. In gaining its autonomy from aesthetic criteria, the artworld has long since ensured itself of the means to recuperate practices utterly incompatible



with its own values, as long as it is able to stamp them with the name of an artist (think of how The Factory, for instance, and the collective process underlying it, was eclipsed behind the name of Andy Warhol).

BEYOND MUTUAL INTEREST

These are of course minority practices. The artworld has not merely contented itself with being severely late in terms of achieving its oft-repeated world-transforming objectives, but has remained consistently late in terms of even grasping its own lateness. The business world, however, has been swift to catch on to its own interest in breaking down art into an aggregate of skills, which can then be profitably instrumentalised. Which is what makes describing art in terms of its competencies a highly ambivalent endeavour. As Eve Chiapello and others have shown, what were formerly art-specific competencies – exemplified by such

12. Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski offer a telling example of this in their collaborative work, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard, Paris, 1999; English translation forthcoming, January 2005, Verso, London, p 418, when they compare the utopian demands of a generation ago with the reality today to show the degree of recuperation. 'The demand for creativity, which was taken up particularly by wage-earners with high levels of education, engineers or managers, enjoyed a level of recognition that had not even been hoped for thirty years earlier, when it became obvious that an ever increasing percentage of profits stemmed from the exploitation of such resources as inventiveness, imagination, innovation, developed ... above all in the rapidly expanding sectors of services and cultural production, which engendered, amongst other effects, the weakening of the opposition – upon which, for the past century, artistic critique had been based – between intellectuals and businessmen, between artists and bourgeois.' See also, in this volume, Eve Chiapello, 'The "artist critique" of management and capitalism: evolution and co-optation'.



watchwords as autonomy, flexibility, inventiveness, mobility, creativity, refusal of hierarchy, intrinsic motivation, and so on – have been self-consciously harnessed by managerial rationality, and now describe the ideal-type of the qualified worker of the future as much as they do the artist.¹² In his recent and blistering essay, *Portrait of the Artist as a Labourer*, Pierre-Michel Menger, following Chiapello's lead, has described art as 'a principle of fermentation for neo-capitalism'. Art has ceased, he suggests, to have heuristic value for anything but developing



cutting-edge business models, test-driving new modes of production, or analysing the ins and outs of individualised job relations. 'Today', he writes:

... the development and organisation of the activities specific to artistic creation illustrate the ideal of a sophisticated division of labour, which simultaneously satisfies the exigencies of segmenting tasks and competencies, in keeping with the principle of increasingly differentiated knowledge, and its dynamic inscription into the play of functional inter-dependencies and team relations.¹³

One might like to say that, when thus considered as a set of specific competencies and incompetencies, art is morally neutral; that although artistic competencies, and even the inquiry-engendering, stereotype-busting, paradigm-questioning incompetencies associated with it, can be harnessed by economic self-interest, art cannot be held responsible for the uses to which it is put. But it is precisely this sort of discourse that has led to the problem in the first place. This instrumentalisation can be avoided only if the ethical horizon against which collaboration takes place is explicitly defined. When art forsakes the impotence of its autonomous realm, when it quits the artworld for the normative realm of political activism and collaboration, what is needed is a clear understanding of why people collaborate at all.

Mainstream political liberalism of all types – rational choice theory, welfare economics, contractualism, and other accountancy-based theories of being together – asserts that collaboration, and indeed social life in general, starts and finishes in the utilitarian republic of cost-benefit analysis, where everyone has their eye on their exclusive self-interest.¹⁴ Pushed to the extreme, this vision construes civil interaction as an endless chain of calculated choices, where, in the absence of mutual confidence, people collaborate with each other only on the basis of projected reciprocal gain. I recall coming across an astute characterisation of this sort of accountancy-based morality in Amartya Sen's book on welfare economics.¹⁵ Sen imagines a 'typical' exchange between mutual-gain seekers, which goes something like this:

'Where is the train station?' a passer-by asks me.
'Right over there,' I say, pointing to the post office, 'and would you mind mailing this letter for me on your way?'
'Certainly,' he replies, set on opening the envelope to see if there is anything of interest inside.

This vision cannot be the whole truth, however, if only because we know it is possible to act generously, setting aside or even sacrificing personal interest. Disinterested action no more inevitably conceals personal interest than moral action necessarily requires forsaking self-interest. But what is really wrong with this idea is that it supposes the self to be a fixed, given, and isolated quantity. Lone individuals existing outside the relationships and interactions that constitute them are an utter fiction: the self, like society, is multiple; we are plural rather than singular – which is why we are different things for different people. There is, in other words, no pre-social, pre-collaborative, individuality: as Emile Durkheim, Margaret Mead, John Dewey, and others have

13. Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2002, p 8.

14. For John Rawls, perhaps the most influential theorist of political liberalism, even positive freedoms are construed exclusively from an instrumental viewpoint, as a means of obtaining or maintaining negative freedoms. See his *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.

15. Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1987.

argued, collaborative association is the very condition of possibility of individuality. Philippe Chaniel writes in his recent book on 'civic associationism', to assert:

... in opposition to utilitarianism and theories of social contract, that solidarity and reciprocal confidence constitute the analytically pre-contractual element of any contract; to emphasise with Mauss that the gift – a mixture of freedom and obligation, interest and disinterest – is the true bedrock of human sociality, is above all to point out that social relations cannot be dissolved into a calculation of interests, and that they are on the contrary an unconditional precondition.¹⁶

In other words, collaboration cannot be reduced to common interest. Which is why we can say that art is not merely a *set* but truly a *community* of competencies and perceptions. A community that has to be liberated from its overarching normative structures so that, as Mauss said in a different context, its 'invisible ties of confidence' can be rewoven (which for him meant ensuring a place for everyone in that space of mutual gift-giving that is society itself). The paradox is that there must be at least an inchoate community of art beneath the set of lone individual artists. The paradox of artistic collaboration is thus the paradox of the gift: just as the gift *presupposes* the sort of confidence that it contributes to establishing, so too collaboration – and more generally, free association in civil society – presupposes the very sort of solidarity that it is in part reinforcing. Circles of this kind are vicious only from a theoretical point of view – the important thing is to set the process in motion. For the paradox is one of incompleteness, and on that note we find ourselves back in the realm of art, for the management of incompleteness is indeed an artistic competence.

CREATIVE DEMOCRACY

A short example before concluding. One might think that by using discussion and decision-making as his material, François Deck's collaborative practice is informed by something akin to Jürgen Habermas's democratic proceduralism, that is, the idea that individuals can attain freedom only through a strategy of public and inter-subjective verbal argumentation. This is a plausible conjecture, inasmuch as Habermas's theory does foster autonomy (consensus remaining merely the regulatory horizon of any discussion, and not its goal). And yet, I think Deck's work is far closer to a Deweyan conception of democracy, where communicative freedom is incarnated not in inter-subjective speech but in uniting individual forces around common problems. Autonomy, after all, is about free and democratic will formation: and Dewey is unconvinced that real collaboration can take place in the absence of pre-political collaboration. Because, for Dewey, the political sphere is not – as it is for Habermas – a site for exercising communicative freedom, but a cognitive tool by means of which society endeavours experimentally to explore, deal with, and resolve problems specific to the coordination of social action. In particular, Dewey – like Durkheim – always sought to ground pre-political collaboration

16. Philippe Chaniel, *Justice, don et association*, La Découverte, Paris, 2001, p 293.

(necessary for democratic will formation) in the *division of labour*, starting with the idea that only an equitable division of labour can lead each member of the society to an awareness of the need for cooperative participation with all others in view of common objectives. And this is precisely what I see as underlying Deck's notion of competence-crossing. In order for citizens to even want to contribute to public will formation, they must have already integrated democratic procedure as a normative component of their daily habits. As Dewey writes in his essay 'Creative Democracy: the task before us', 'democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associative life. It is the very idea of community life.'¹⁷ We cannot pursue Dewey's fundamental insight here, but it is one clearly shared by François Deck: that questions – or what Dewey refers to as 'problems' – are the fuel of meaningful public life. In their perspective, formulating questions is less about eliciting responses than an act of calling a participatory public into existence.

I have been arguing that free collaborative interaction is an essential dimension of human existence – and even individual existence – though it is not always an actualised dimension. The obvious counter-argument would be to emphasise that such speculation overlooks the extent to which 'private' individuals are ultimately egoistic beings, and to haul out a long litany of supporting evidence. This ultimately Hobbesian view of man and society – with its supposedly hard-headed, though actually somewhat circular, reliance on the very 'facts' that although must end up bolstering – is profoundly lacking in ethical creativity. Hobbes is no place to start from, though he may well be where we end up, unless public collaboration is understood differently. For without concrete possibilities for public interaction that allows participants to develop freely, people will become 'private' in the Hobbesian sense of the word, at the expense of both public happiness and the sort of meaningful individuality that it alone can foster.

What I am trying to suggest is that in order to avoid the performative pitfalls of art conventions on the one hand, and of co-optation by capital on the other – in order, that is, to bring about conditions that will make collaboration 'fruitful and necessary' – we need an almost pre-modern understanding of art, breaking with the institutionalised trinity author-work-public; an understanding that grasps art in terms of its specific means and not its specific ends.

Some will say, why throw out the baby with the bath water? But we are not dealing with babies and bath waters – or more precisely, art, as it is now understood, is a baby that lives exclusively in bath water. If the metaphor cannot be avoided, then I suggest this solution, in homage to the Brazilian Anthropophagic Movement of the 1920s and 30s¹⁸: that we cook the baby in the bath water, eat the baby, wash it down with the bath water, thereby digesting, assimilating, and embodying the best parts of what art was, and, in order that the future be something other and more than the obsolete in reverse, get on with fusing artistic competencies – by which of course I really mean *use-values* – with other competencies, fostering the delicate essence of extra-disciplinary collaboration.

17. John Dewey, 'Creative democracy – the task before us', in *The philosopher of the common man; essays in honour of John Dewey to celebrate his eightieth birthday*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1968, p 220.

18. See Oswald de Andrade, 'The Cannibalist Manifesto', trans Stephen Berg, in *Third Text* 46, Spring 1999, pp 92-95.

Copyright of Third Text is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Third Text is the property of Routledge, Ltd.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.