

Roxane Permar is an artist based in the Shetland Islands where she was a founder-member of Veer North, the Shetland Visual Artists Group. She sees art as a vehicle for change that can stretch people's creative imaginations, enhance their self-esteem and engender a sense of ownership in all aspects of their lives. She works with people of all ages, from toddlers to pensioners in many different kinds of situations and places. She is currently working in collaboration with Nayan Kulkarni (nkProjects) on the Mareel Artist Commission for Shetland's proposed new music and cinema venue.

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

I shall come clean from the start. I am hooked on collaboration. Of course I've had my moments when I vowed I would never work with anyone again to make art in collaboration. Instead I would find freedom from the challenge of 'collective responsibility' by working on my own, like a 'proper' artist. But no sooner than I have made such resolutions, do I once again begin testing different ways to continue working with other artists and involve people in the processes of making art.

So why do I do it? Why do I willingly engage in such a challenging process of working? Of course some experiences of collaboration are easier than others. Some seem effortless while others are endlessly impossible. But there really is no creative experience that beats the thrill of collaborative creation. It is empowering and challenging. I love it when you don't know how you came up with the ideas or know precisely who thought what and when.



***Domestic Dialogues*, (2007)** Shetland and St Petersburg, Russia in collaboration with Susan Timmins; Detail from part 3 (Shetland, The Claesline Gallery) and part 2 (*Dialogi*, 8th International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Manezh Gallery).

My seminal moment in the process of unpicking the tangled web of collaborative doubt came in 1998 when I met Karen Scopa. She was researching collaboration in fine art practice, hoping to find ways to challenge the profession and develop new approaches

to creativity, which were critical and experimental in nature.¹ The framework she developed for the critical analysis of collaboration helped me understand the complexity of the processes more deeply. Our discussions compelled me not only to re-evaluate my position but also to define my critical understanding of collaboration, and in fact shape much of what I write here.

This new set of critical tools reinvigorated my commitment to collaboration. I stood back and asked myself again what collaboration means. At one level it is simply people working together to achieve something they could not do alone. But creative collaboration is a more complex process that is shaped by a multiplicity of factors influenced by the degree to which there is shared vision, commitment and ownership as well as the context in which the collaboration takes place.



Blueprints
detail of 120
Perspex boxes
recording all
stages of the
project, realised
in collaboration
with residents of
Newlyn and
Blair Todd,
Newlyn Art
Gallery,
Cornwall (2007).

The American writer, Jeff Kelley, strikes the right chord by highlighting the importance of transformation and change in the creative process by defining collaboration as “a process of mutual transformation in which the collaborators, and thus their common work, are in some way changed. Most importantly, the creative process itself is transformed in a collaborative relationship.”²

Mutual transformation is great in theory, but when you are working with other people, and you're in the middle of a transformative process, it can be easy to lose your way. That is why it is important to define your terms from the very beginning. Build a good foundation upon which to base the collaboration. Be honest and thorough, posing critical questions early on rather than after it is too late.

Critical questions for collaboration:

- Why do I want to collaborate?
- Who will I be working with?
- What is the context of the collaboration?
- How will we work?
- What will we achieve?

There are many reasons to enter into collaboration, and there are many benefits to be gained. Collaboration at its best brings new experiences, providing the opportunity to work with new people, in new contexts and across disciplines.

¹ Scopa, K. *The Development of Strategies for Interdisciplinary Collaboration within the Visual Arts*, PhD Dissertation, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, 2003.

² Kelley, J. 'Common Work' in *Mapping the Terrain, New Genre Public Art*, ed. by S. Lacy. Seattle, 1995, p. 140

You can learn new skills, something about yourself or new knowledge from the situation, context or your co-collaborators. You can do things that you couldn't do on your own, such as working to a larger scale or with new materials, processes and technologies. Working with others can give a critical context to share thinking, a sounding board for developing ideas and providing critical perspective.

Collaboration can help you to gain effectiveness or strength by increasing numbers or perhaps linking with an organisation. Opportunities and increased resources can be available to a collaborative group that you could not access as an individual. It can be easier to face complex situations with others rather than alone.

There are social aspects, too, in working with others, so if you don't like working with people, then collaboration is probably not a good idea, even virtually. It can, however, be an important way to break the pattern of solitude dominant in some fields of cultural practice. Working with others can increase responsibility. I like the fact that I become accountable to others when I work in collaboration. I work harder because I don't want to let anyone down.

One of the most important decisions in taking a collaborative journey is finding your co-collaborators. It has taken me years to learn I must be ruthless and take a hard look at the people I might work with. It may be stating the obvious, but it really is fundamental to successful collaboration that everyone works well together. So you need to ask questions not only of yourself but of your potential co-collaborators as well.

The question of motivation is paramount. Why do your co-collaborators want to work on the project? Do they share your level of commitment? If not, then the collaboration is at risk of becoming unbalanced. What about their professional fields of practice? Do you share experience or will you come at the work from different directions? What can they offer you? And what do you offer them? Would you like to work with them? Do you trust and have respect for them? Is it mutual?



1,100 Rosebuds,
participatory project
realised at Newlyn Art
Gallery, Cornwall (2003-4)
for the CST project
(Newcastle, Leeds,
Cornwall).

Another tricky issue, but an important one to understand, is the context in which you are working. It may be straightforward, but more likely than not it will be complex, as the context for collaboration can take different forms. It may have a physical location or it could be set within a situation that is underpinned by a social or cultural context. It is also possible that the collaboration is framed by a set of ideas or issues. If so, where do they come from? Are you, for example, working within a voluntary, corporate or institutional context?

On a more mundane level, where will you work? Is it a 'neutral' site? The physical location of where you come together can affect the balance of working relationships. If the work takes place in a space or place where some of the collaborators have ownership, or greater familiarity, it can damage the delicate power balance within the working relationships. If your co-collaborators are dispersed geographically, the locations for meetings or workshops can effect travel time and cost differently for each person. Of course these days collaboration can be located virtually in which case factors relating to virtual environments and contexts will influence the collaboration.

I have learned there is no clear-cut method for collaborating, because the very nature of creative collaboration is dynamic. Therefore you need to find ways to ensure that the process can be open and flexible while not losing shape. Make sure everyone agrees with your structure and methods of working. Allow for the relationship between the individual and the group, or partnership if it is a two-person collaboration, to breathe.

Good communication lies at the heart of this process. Make sure you use appropriate means of communication. Embrace the advantages of technology, but don't let e-mail spoil the working relationships. Use new technologies appropriately in combination with face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, video conferencing and perhaps even paper. Involve everyone in the process of negotiating roles and decision-making. Listen. Try to be responsive and flexible throughout the process, be prepared to stop, evaluate and change what you're doing and how you're doing it. Thus when you have discovered something new, you can follow it; on the other hand, if things aren't going well, you can try to fix it. Be clear about the outcome of your collaboration. It could be a tangible object, or it could be something more ephemeral, perhaps a new way of working, a new process or solution to a problem. Whatever it is, even if it is very elusive, be clear from the start.

Time is a key factor and can be a sensitive issue. We all know how precious it is. Firstly, the overall timescale for the collaboration will be crucial to defining the pace of the project. Sometimes you need a lot of time in order to build the kind of relationships necessary to achieve your outcomes. On the other hand, too much time may undermine. Secondly, how much time will each co-collaborator devote to the project? While this question should be resolved when you agree your working methods, nonetheless, it can be one of the most difficult issues to negotiate in the relationship between the individual and the group.



4,000 Flowers, realised in collaboration with Shillam + Smith Architects and the North Fulham NDC as part of *Park Matters* (2003).

Money can be another sensitive issue that can unfortunately make or break collaboration. Often artists work for less than people in other fields. Don't undervalue what you do and if necessary prepare a strategy to ensure there is parity among all co-collaborators. Try to be clear about how much money is available to the project and

how it will be managed. When working within different cultural contexts, it is likely that there will be economic disparity. As a group it is important to recognise differences in financial systems.

So how do you make collaboration work? It is one thing to have coherent aims, be clear about your motivation, identify time, find money and devise a method for approaching your work. But in addition to these practical considerations, there are other factors which can make or break collaboration. These are less visible and more difficult to evaluate.

I have already mentioned trust and mutual respect. Whether you start with these or build them over time, a creative collaboration will not really succeed without them. Humbleness and generosity are two other essential ingredients for genuine collaboration because you need to be able to share. You must share what you know, think and feel. You can't be secretive or precious about your ideas or information.

“Common ground, shared creative vision, shared ownership and mutually beneficial transformation” lie at the heart of successful collaboration. Karen Scopa has identified these qualities as essential for creative collaboration. They are present in successful collaboration and lacking in unsuccessful collaboration.³

Shared authorship, shared vision, common ground. These qualities define the magic factor of collaboration. The key to creative collaboration lies in the relational dynamics of sharing. And perhaps therein lies the allure, the hook that has snared me. The magic factor. The beauty of shared creativity.



The Croft Cosy Project (1992-1995), Shetland Islands, in collaboration with Wilma Johnson C-Type photograph. *The Croft Cosy* is a snug-fitting cover, hand-knitted in Shetland wool in Fair Isle and Shetland patterns for a traditional Shetland croft house. Members of the local community volunteered to hand knit it. In fact offers to help came in from around the world. The project was undertaken in collaboration with Shetlander, Wilma Johnson, from 1992 to 1995. It attracted international attention and inspired local response in many forms, from a skit in the annual fire festival, Up Helly Aa, to the inaugural Altling Debate in the 1994-95 season.

³ Scopa, p. 183

FURTHER READING

'Common Work' in **Mapping the Terrain, New Genre Public Art**, Jeff Kelley, ed. by S. Lacy (Seattle, 1995)

Mitchell, William J., Alan S. Inouye, and Marjory S. Blumenthal, Editors, **Beyond Productivity: Information, Technology, Innovation and Creativity**, Committee on Information Technology and Creativity (National Research Council, 2003)

The Development of Strategies for Interdisciplinary Collaboration within the Visual Arts, Karen Scopa (PhD Dissertation, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, 2003)

Women's Work, Two Years in the Life of A Women Artists Group, Brixton Artists Collective, London (1986)

BIOGRAPHY continued

Some of Roxane's collaborative partners in previous projects include:

Wilma Johnson (*The Croft Cosy Project*, Shetland, 1992-1995)

Susan Timmins (*The Nuclear Roadshow*, Shetland 1990 and *Domestic Dialogues*, Shetland and St Petersburg, Russia, 2007)

Françoise Dupré (*the emplacements project*, 1997—2003, London and St Petersburg, Russia)

Blair Todd, residents of Newlyn and staff of Newlyn Art Gallery and Cowlen Construction (*Blueprints*, Newlyn, Cornwall, 2007)



The Nuclear Roadshow (1990) Shetland Islands in collaboration with Susan Timmins.

www.roseland.typepad.com

www.domesticdialogues.blogspot.com

www.emplacements.co.uk

www.veernorth.org.uk