

COLLABORATION RECORDING ITS OWN CONDITION*

(2 interviews, 1 editor)

Jemima Stehli, John Hilliard, Simon Baker

Starting

When I first asked about making a work J. seemed resistant to the idea, to the point where I became more and more intrigued about the possibility of doing it. There was a long process of discussion and it took a year before we had a proper conversation about it, and then we spent a day together where s/he really questioned me about what I wanted to do and I convinced J. that it was a good idea.

The initiative for the collaboration was definitely coming from the other direction. I can't imagine embarking on the collaboration for my own reasons, and in fact I was quite resistant to the idea when it was first proposed, and it took about a year of persuasion and mentioning it every time we saw one another, and eventually we had a meeting and we had a discussion about it and we did some preliminary drawings to draft out ideas and that's how it started: the agreement was that we would try something together and see how it went, and in the event it went quite well and we decided to continue.

In those very first discussions s/he immediately took it to a level that I wasn't expecting. That was quite challenging because although I've played around with ideas of collaboration or, rather, implication (putting somebody else in my work, or getting them to play a role), I'd never actually made a collaboration. Collaboration, in a way, was very hard to contain within the ways that I'd set up of understanding what I was doing in my own practice.

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The most difficult thing was to get over that first hurdle of accepting the reality of working collaboratively with someone else and relinquishing a lot of what I call my authorial decisions. I was no longer the sole author. I was the co-author and I wasn't used to sharing. I wasn't used to that. I work in more of a kind of selfish way, so that was one hurdle to get over, but clearly I did get over that hurdle, and was very comfortable having made that move. The second thing was really that approach to a way of working but I think that again once I'd conditioned myself to a rather more fluid approach to making decisions about how work would progress, again I became quite comfortable with that.

It was hard to deal with those things because of the way that s/he structured things so carefully. So even though I could see the photograph happening, if I wasn't quite happy it was hard to affect that. Although that changed over the course of the collaboration and, in fact, the one of those works that I like out of that series is the one with the shadow across the card: that was the one where I said, just leave it, and it happened and I liked it, because for me the photograph is about what happens in that moment of taking the photograph. So if something's overly structured beforehand it doesn't do that for me. I want the photograph to be the moment where something appears.

Resistance

I think maybe part of my initial resistance to the collaboration was that within my own working history there is a body of work that deals specifically with the voyeuristic dimensions of photography. I received a lot of negative comment, especially from a feminist perspective, about the work I was doing. It's not that I was susceptible to that criticism to the extent that I would be deterred from my own agenda: I wasn't; but if you like I'd moved on from examining that particular facet of photography and in a way once this collaboration was proposed I thought it would put me back in that position again and it's not something that I would have particularly sought. On the other hand, if I felt there was a reason to be in that position. I would go there regardless of the prospect of any further adverse comment.

I wanted to challenge J. about earlier works that s/he'd made because subsequent works became very formal, and in fact, although during the collaboration, I became more interested in those works, at this point I was interested in what I thought had happened previously where s/he'd seemed to censor their subject matter in the light of external criticism. I think that those works were quite risky from J's point of view, in terms of what s/he was exposing about ways of looking. That's what I thought was interesting about them; what they had in common with what I was doing.

Criticism

I think power is a term that has been really over-used in relation to my practice. I think this comes from a misunderstanding of feminist arguments and I have problems with oversimplified versions of such ideas. Whereas responsibility, on the other hand, does play a part in the way the work is made and how it might be understood. In the action of making the work, the responsibility of the artist is to create a situation where the audience is asked to consider its response: it's very important for things to be left open, although there's a danger in that too.

I don't think the collaboration has changed the way I think about my own work although perhaps what it did do was remind me how I thought about it. As I understand J's position I'm not sure there is a big distinction because I think s/he's very forthright in admitting a critical awareness of the female body as the camera's victim but at the same time admitting a certain degree of pleasure in being in that position, or in looking at those kind of images, and I think my position in the past was somewhat comparable. It certainly was a critical position: pointing out an awareness of the problem of the body as the camera's victim but at the same time, admitting my own visual pleasure in images of the body as seen through film and photography. Through my actions, but not by choice, I invited a great deal of criticism; clearly what I was doing was construed as adding to an existing problem of the objectification of the body. But my own position was never so rigidly moralising. I think there was a moral dimension to it, but the flipside of that was that I was admitting a certain degree of pleasure, and it seemed to me that a lot of feminist writing of the 1970s wanted to deny

the pleasure of images of the body and I was always interested in examining my own responses, and my own behaviour, and making admissions about my own position. In fact, I think my own position then was not particularly different from the kind of position that people have now.

The difference in the 80s was that there was more of a sense of working for the good of something, but there's more of a question now about what is 'good' in terms of a good way of looking. Those works that s/he made came out of that film analysis of looking, and was treated as a very analytical investigation of images and ways of looking in men and women. And then s/he suffered a backlash where people became very concerned about what was being exposed. For me, that's the point that things become interesting, precisely because it's exposing things. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be interesting in the first place. These are still live issues: the images s/he made, and works by Allen Jones and Helmut Newton, still raise live issues. They don't have to be controlled and put into the past as a problem for feminist argument. We've seen the work in that way and now we can look again and see what it tells us about fundamental things about looking at objects and images. If this series of works can do that, then that would be a great thing to have happened.

Drawing

In terms of a working practice it was a hybrid because I'm the kind of person who does a lot of preparation by drawing, writing, making lists, diagrams: I have very specific objectives. Relatively speaking, J's practice is rather more spontaneous so I think s/he had to adapt to the rather more prescriptive elements of my practice and I had to adapt to their rather more spontaneous imperatives. I think it's probably like the difference between a band that writes material and then goes into the studio to record it, having rehearsed it, and a band that just books studio time and then makes it up as they go along. I'm clearly in the first category and I don't think I could have let go of that way of working completely to the extent that the two of us entered the studio without any idea of what we might do and then played around and did it. The suggestion when we first met to talk about the collaboration was that we should

each bring our cameras and take photographs, and I flatly refused to do that. I said I can't do that, I can't work like that. What we should do is meet and talk about some ideas and draft some ideas on paper, which is actually what we did. But although in that first phase of working together I was laying down the law a bit, subsequently there was a drift in the other direction: there was a lot of give and take. That first insistence of mine didn't persist and in fact I can't remember to what extent there were drawings for the final piece

The first thing that was odd to me was J's insistence on drawing. The way that s/he would work would be to first sit down and make a drawing, which was really convincing but was totally alien to my way of working, and left me thinking, 'what planet are you from?' For me the first thing would normally be to start taking lots of Polaroids, so that you could start to see the image, the starting point, which you then manipulate as much as you need to until you've got what you want from it. One of the things that was always an issue was that my way of working is quite extravagant, you're straight in there taking pictures when you don't really know what you're doing. It's really hit and miss but I really enjoy that process; not over-determining the result. For me, the photograph is this thing that I'm trying to figure out as I go along, and I never know how it's going to work, whereas J. has a lot of confidence in the idea that if s/he sets something up it will mean something specific. I'm much more sceptical about things translating in that way within the work, in fact, I think that actually, that structuring of the image is like an avoidance tactic for what the image might actually mean.

Triple Exposure

I think that the first work we made, Triple Exposure, was closely related to an earlier work of mine, and indeed was based very specifically on one of those works. It wasn't my idea to make it but once we had agreed on that as a starting point then we both made contributions.

Probably the first work, Triple Exposure, is the most like one of mine, because it looks like one of mine, but actually it isn't, because the thing that makes my work my work is the thing about agency, and I'm not holding the

cable release and there's this other photographer in it. I think the conceptual aspect of this change is more interesting when you get to the more abstract works.

White Card/Brown Card

The next pieces we made were called White Card and Brown Card. I think they were truly a hybrid between work I was doing at that time, which deliberately sought to block out the majority of the spectator's view, the majority of the picture's area, and also J's work because that blocking screen was then punctured at three points by viewing panels which allowed you to see parts of her/my body. So that tension between revealing a view of oneself and concealing a view was very much a hybrid of those aspects of our individual works.

What the collaboration started to do was pull apart our identities. When you took the Tit Card image, which became White Card and Brown Card, there were differences in how each of us saw them. What s/he liked about them for example, was where the body comes through the card: s/he saw that as like being a picture. For me it was the absolute opposite, for me it was like taking a part of the body like the breast, a part of the female body which is often represented as a flat image, and turning into an object again, a thing in the world. But s/he was turning things back into pictures, so that was really uncomfortable for me, and I still have mixed feelings about that work, although some of the things in it come from me, such as the fact that it's in the studio, and the performative aspect; stretching to hold the board; and the ridiculousness of it, with feet coming out the bottom.

Double Up

Within the collaborations there is an element of cross-direction, of saying why don't you do this, or that: certainly in Double Up I was being quite strongly directed. I was always, in these works, in the position of the photographer and

s/he was more in the position of the photographed. But in Double Up as in, probably, all the other works, even though I was taking the pictures s/he was also directing because we were communicating with each other and s/he was telling me what to do. S/he's used to being in both positions at once and I would say in these collaborative works s/he was also in both those positions whereas my own position is somebody who's usually behind the camera: I'm not normally in those two positions at once. And I'm much more likely to be the one issuing directions, both to myself but also to those I'm photographing; if there are models, also issuing directions to models but it's not that I'm resistant to the model saying why don't we try this, and of course very often those suggestions are the ones that generate very interesting results.

Double Up was probably the most uncomfortable work to make: I mean physically, for J., it was uncomfortable because s/he was in that position for days at a time, and also because of the position that I'm in, physically. But also because s/he uses models a lot (which I don't often do). S/he often had ideas and said, this is a work that I made thinking about the collaboration, although actually it's not a collaborative work. That work (Double Up), in contrast to Table, which was a genuinely collaborative work, was a remaking of a previous work from 2002, called 'Untitled'. I had thought about the two sides within the image, which in the first version are just bits of card, but I'd always thought about them as being somebody's legs. I liked the idea that by making the legs those of the person taking the photograph, the outside and inside were flipped over. But that was a very awkward work to hand over because it was already a complete piece of work in my mind. In a way, what I really wanted was for J. to do it and it to be my work, but in the end I became much less interested in it as a piece than I was with Table, for instance. Both Double Up and Table were made in the last summer of working together and they were both the most difficult to make, in different ways.

Table

Sculpture was an ingredient in all of this work which I think was very much in J's mind, and it's interesting that it was my background in making sculpture which

led to working with photography, so it fits quite neatly into the scheme of things. Even though it was only made of card, Table turned out to be a fully functioning table which J. used in the studio and put very heavy objects on. In the first instance it was a kind of prop and I've certainly been very much in the habit of making props for my own work so the hands-on, practical side of making things akin to sculpture has continued for me in that way and I think in terms of the sort of spatial thinking it has also continued as well.

I insisted that we made the table. I felt that it was about something that was present in my work but that had not really been looked at: the formalisation within the work. People mention it but actually it's a really important part of how my work is constructed. When we decided to make the work with a table that could be photographed from four directions I was really insistent that we made the table. It's an idealised, sculptural version of a table, not a real table, so there's a play between the real, and the aesthetic or imagined, and it's also very much more about the studio space. Although it's interesting too, that the work that s/he liked best that came out of that process was the one where you can see all my works in the background on the walls, where my figure is present, whereas for me I preferred the more abstract versions because they offer more of an opportunity to think about ideas of structure, and place more emphasis on the object in space, and light, and so on, without the body: for me, the body is implied.

Contact Prints

Invariably we liked different contact prints; there wasn't usually a ready agreement. I think that that's interesting: it's almost as though we entered the collaboration from two distinct positions and we exited it from two distinct positions. When we were looking at the results of what we'd done we definitely had different preferences: but there were also overlaps where we agreed about which one to make.

We spent four or five days taking the photograph and had hundreds of contact sheets as a result. J. thought that that was unnecessary. In the end, we had all these contact sheets and spent days putting them all up on the wall and

deciding which we'd enlarge, and we ended up with a huge selection of enlargements, which is something that s/he would do, but not to that same degree. Then I'd look at the contact sheets and say 'it's not right yet' and s/he'd look at it and say 'but this one's a perfectly good photograph', which it was, but it wasn't quite right for me, it wasn't quite there yet, so s/he'd have to go through this physical ordeal, bending over taking photographs, again. But in the end we got the image I wanted.

Afterwards

One of the first works I made subsequently was a work that I had designed as a collaborative piece where J. would be the model, so probably the degree of collaboration would have been less than in the truly collaborative works. It would have been a work with J. more conventionally there as a model rather than as a contributor. But nevertheless it was coming from work that we had done together. I wanted to make it in J's studio, but s/he declined partly because s/he didn't want me to inhabit that space for my own individual work and secondly because s/he had some other plans for using that space at the time so it would have been inconvenient. But nevertheless I went ahead and made that work in a different location and with a different model but it is a work made in an artist's studio environment and I've made a number of works which are either located in an art school environment or an artists studio environment, and we could say that the models in the work are effectively being themselves. Either as professional models employed in art schools or as art students and artists.

What happened afterwards was that I used the collaboration to shift my work towards wider concerns about form and space. And then in my own work I started to make works like Photo Performance with a Larry Bell sculpture (and others in relation to Dan Graham's work too) that were about looking and not looking. With Photo Performance I think I took liberties, as I was working with an artist whose practice isn't yet visible. With J. our positions were quite safe, and although I still find some of the work awkward, I don't think they're settled, and that's what makes them challenging: you can still take our works separately

or take a few of those works in the frame of the collaboration. But in Photo Performance piece I was taking liberties. From my point of view I took bigger risks, because it was framed within my practice I could allow much bigger risks in terms of what happened.

Echoes

It's very hard to quantify, after a certain point, what the echo of the collaboration is: I think I'm more likely to settle back into my previous way of working than not, although there are the obvious examples of the works that have as their location a studio space and possibly they might not have happened without having gone through that collaboration. How it goes on from there I'm not sure. I don't honestly think the collaboration has made me think differently about my own previous work and that's probably a reflection of a rather willful, single-minded personality. And actually the way I'm working at the moment is if anything rather the reverse of that rather more open collaborative practice.

Magically, by the final collaboration process we ended up being much more generous. J. had just started doing these four-sided works, and I didn't have to have my identity in the work so clearly. I began enjoying the process of making the work, without thinking about how it made sense in terms of the trajectory of my own work or the meaning of that, but just enjoying the process of making a photograph. It's only once you bring it into the collaboration that it causes you to think about that problem of where it's going. The thing I still think about is the fact that the collaboration made me implicit in my own work in a way that I've made other people implicit in my work before and that's something which is still quite odd for me. It's also clear to me that although collaboration was something I'd always talked about in relation to my work, I now have a much better understanding of what it really means. I used to talk more about implication, like a seduction. Now I see there being very subtle distinction between something that is genuinely a collaboration, and something that isn't, and how the authorship of the work determines the meaning of it. What I'm really concerned about is what happens when you stand in front of a piece of work, and what happens in that relationship with it. When I've brought other

people into the work it's not so much about implication but about trust; and being able to see where that experiment, or experience takes you.