On Collaboration

Collaboration is not easy—at least for me—so the question is: why do it? There are a few ways to answer this question in relation to my own experiences in and with collaborative practices (especially artistic), but hopefully with some traction for others.[1]

1. *Collaboration brings you up against your limits.* Working collaboratively means that there is another agent—or agents—involved. An agent that will not always agree with your take on things or with whom you will not always agree. The attendant affects such as frustration, irritation…perhaps even stronger ones, are a sign that an edge has been found (put bluntly, the edge of your ego). Collaboration in this sense can involve a kind of oblique self-knowledge.

It does mean, however, that there has to be some surrendering (of ego) and a willingness to 'go with the flow'. This surrendering is not easy and brings about its own dangers, for example of becoming unmoored (or, at least, this can be a fear). Here it is a question of ratios and dosages.[2] How much of the collective subject can one safely enter in to?

2. *Collaboration can produce something that's different.* Involving other agents means that what is produced is both of you and not of you at the same time. Certainly, a collaboration can throw up surprises. Or it can take you somewhere else. In writing, for example, it can mean your particular archive—your various investments and values—are interrogated (or, more simply, that archives are shared).[3] In art practice it can mean unexpected images and narratives arrive from elsewhere. At any rate, for those who are fed up with their particular

self, a collaboration allows the exploration of other territories outside the self. Or, put differently, a collaboration can 'speak back' to its producers as if from some other place.

The danger here is that you will not always like what the collaboration produces. Alongside the moments when you recognise that something compelling has been done, something you could not have done on your own—or even imagined—but also something that you had a hand in, are also the embarrassing results, even the shameful ones (at least for you, perhaps not for the others). And, again, it will also sometimes be the case that those others you collaborate with do not think, plan or operate as you do—or, indeed, like your ideas, and so forth.

3. *Collaboration can work against judgement.* This leads on from the above. Collaboration allows you to surrender your personal judgement, but also works to counteract the fear of being judged as an individual—is this more or less a universal fear? —and, more particularly as an individual producer. Again, this is strictly speaking a side-effect of the collaborative process, but it does mean there can be a certain amount of 'freeing up'. Certainly anxiety, for example, seems to be tethered to individual agency (at least, this is my experience). The holding of things in a lighter manner—even with humour—can in itself produce interesting results. A practice does not always need to be serious.

The obvious danger here is lack of criteria or how to know whether what you've made (broadly speaking) is any good. The key is perhaps to substitute more of a pragmatics (in place of the good/bad judgement). Does the thing that has been produced work? Does it make you want to act/move in some way?[4] Or does it make you laugh for example? And then, crucially, does it enable or foreground some kind of transformation?

4. *Collaboration breaks with atomisation.* In a way this is another side-effect of the collaborative process insofar as it does not (necessarily) concern what is produced by the collaboration (if one can necessarily separate these two). But, on the other hand, it is a key factor and influences everything else. There are all sorts of aspects to this, for example, the building of trust or the sharing of anxieties. The dealing with shame. The collaboration can be something that can hold you. Generally speaking, a collaboration means simply that you are part of a community. This also relates to 3. above as it also means that in a sense any work is produced *for* the collaboration rather than simply for an external audience that might then judge whatever the results turn out to be (this is also why art can be like an in-joke).

Thinking about the attendant dangers/problems here also returns us to 1. above. Breaking out of atomised subjectivity can be painful. Indeed, being an atomised subject, although it brings many issues, is also a relatively secure place to be. Or, at least, it's a place where there is relative control. Surrendering control is sometimes not a pleasant experience.

5. *Collaboration can be an experiment in the 'collective subject'.* This relates to the above but here is given a less individuated and more therapeutic function. Is there another way of being in the world that does not involve being solely tethered to an existing sense of self? Is there a way of adopting other fictions beyond the fiction of the self? Certainly, there are other practices that can dislodge these fictions, but collaboration also involves the actual putting in place of a different—in this case more collective—fictions (and here the relationship of so-called real and so-called fictional [or *fictioned*] collaborations and collectives can become crucial).[5]

The dangers here are all around losing a sense of self, perhaps without anything to put in its place. And also, what Guattari calls micro-fascisms that can arise in a group (leaders emerge, hierarchies form) (see Guattari 1996). Which is to say the collective subject—or

'subject group'—becomes something different, a kind of subjugated group that ultimately blocks experimentation and collaboration. And then there is also the danger of getting lost in the fiction or of losing any traction on reality. This is an extreme danger, but worth noting.

6. *Collaboration can take on a life of its own.* When a collaboration works—is up and running—it can achieve a certain autonomy from its participants. Or, we might say, it can constitute its own world (so, a collaboration is not only about a different production of subjectivity).[6] This is especially the case with those performance fictions which are more than the sum of their parts or different to the sum anyway. The fiction can, as it were, be entered into. It can also lead the way. This is a compelling aspect of collaboration which produces another entity or 'third thing' between and beyond its participants.

But then perhaps it's the case that the entity can get out of hand (what would it mean to lose control in this sense?). We might be reminded here of those more sorcerous egregores that are conjured, but that then turn back on their communities and summoners. Or perhaps the entity just runs out of stream (for example, there is not enough investment of energy in it?). Certainly, a collaborative practice needs feeding.

7. *Collaboration is invariably experimental.* Again, this is implicit in most of the above but it's worth foregrounding. A collaboration cannot but take chances and test things out. This is particularly the case insofar as it involves different bodies, however these are theorised, that interact. Which interactions work—or, in Deleuze-Spinoza's terminology, which are 'good encounters' [Deleuze 1988]—and which do not? Are there encounters that do not seem to work, but then are working on a different level or register altogether? This might be related to individuals, but it can also be thought in relation to sub and supra individual registers (affects and desires or communities and institutions for example). It might also relate to materials,

even technical machines (so further non-human agents). Taking this even further—and following Mark Fisher—it might also mean collaborating with the 'Outside' however this is figured (see Fisher 2016).

The dangers here are the 'bad encounters' that paralyse and depress, that stop things in their tracks (although we need to be alert to the possibility that impasses can also mean other paths are taken). But, once again, there is also a more existential danger of becoming lost in the collaboration. Certainly, in terms of collaborating with the Outside there is the danger, once again, that one loses ones mooring (so collaboration—for me at least—involves an art of dosages). In fact, as Reza Negarestani has pointed out, one cannot really collaborate with the Outside (at least, not on one's own terms), but only lure it in (Negarestani 2008). Which is always a risky business and, invariably, means the results can be bloody (but then again sometimes a head needs to be laid on the block).

Collaboration is about different relationships with human and non-human agents and actors. Are we not always collaborating in this sense even when we are working alone? As I write this, reflecting on my own collaborations (especially artistic) it occurs to me that *what* I write is in part determined by the technology I am using as well as all the other figures—including Deleuze and Guattari—that have all contributed to my understanding of collaboration. Beneath the fiction I have of myself as a single, unified, autonomous individual is a distributed network of agents, a wider collaboration which, in part, is obscured by my sense of self, but which those more explicit collaborations can reveal. Any given collaboration foregrounds this larger logic of collaboration (including, perhaps, with fictional entities) that is always and everywhere at work.[7]

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[1] The reflections that follow are mainly connected to my involvement in the art collaboration/collective—and performance fiction—Plastique Fantastique (see www.plastiquefantastique.org) and, as such, are all deeply indebted to the group—David Burrows, Alex Marzeta and Vanessa Page (amongst others)—and, especially, to conversations with David. In fact, an early version of some of what follows was spoken by 'Feveractal', one of the avatars of Plastique Fantastique (at the finale of the Research Project, 'How To Do Things With Performance', at UniArts, Helsinki in April 2021).

[2] Which is why Deleuze and Guattari's second volume of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), although tamer in some ways than *Anti-Oedipus* (1984), is more productive, it seems to me, in relation to art practice (and collaboration). That is, because it is partly a book about dosages (or the relationship between de and re-territorialisation).

[3] This productive interrogation of an archive was especially my experience writing *Fictioning* with David Burrows (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019). Another writing collaboration with Ola Ståhl (see O'Sullivan and Ståhl 2006) involved a more straightforward sharing of archives.

[4] Which is how Jean-François Lyotard understood the 'tensor', not so much as a sign to be interpreted as a 'region in flames' and trigger to make you dance (see Lyotard 1993).

[5] For a discussion of the possible circuits and nestings between real and fictional collectives—in relation to Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1971)—see 'Science Fiction Devices' (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2022).

[6] See 'The Sinthome/Z-point relation or Art as Non-Schizoanalysis' for a development of this point (that art practice is not the production of subjectivity), but also a departure from it (insofar as a collaborative art practice, as well as bringing a world, can also be a kind of 'holding pattern' for points of collapse [Burrows and O'Sullivan 2014]).

[7] What I have written above relates to a set of experiences from within a collaboration, but, I think, there is something similar at stake in our interaction with collaborative work (whether that be a performance, for example, or a piece of writing); because it has been produced collaboratively it is as if it is more *open* somehow—or more able to be interacted with in different ways. Once again then—and thinking especially of this special issue of Deleuze Studies—it is this openness that characterises the importance of the Capitalism and Schizophrenia project. *A Thousand Plateaus* especially is the result of a collaboration that not only invites further collaboration (sometimes in forms that go beyond the textual), but also has the potential to inspire future collaborative efforts, and, through that, perhaps even to call a community and a 'new' people forth.