

Collaborations

By Tamar Yoseloff

In the book *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*, there is an account of an impromptu collaboration between O'Hara and the artist Norman Bluhm. It was a rainy Sunday in 1960, and the poet had gone round to see Bluhm in his studio on Park Avenue South. They chatted, and listened to Prokofiev on the radio. At one stage, Bluhm rose and picked up a brush and, as a way of making a point about the music, swept it across a bit of scrap paper, creating a wide black arc. O'Hara stood and wrote some words on the sheet. 'Right away, we decided to do some more,' Bluhm said later. 'Each one was different,' Bluhm said. 'Frank would write something on a sheet of paper while I was in another part of the studio, making a gesture on the paper. It was all instantaneous, like a conversation between friends. Quick and playful.' 1

You can view some of the 26 poem-paintings Bluhm and O'Hara made on that wet October afternoon in [New York, here](#). They are energetic, spontaneous, a collaboration between two artists who were also great friends. And there is a third 'silent' partner in their collaboration – the composer Prokofiev, whose music provided the inspirational common ground from which the project sprang.

My most exciting and challenging work as a poet has come through collaborations with artists. I have done two projects with the artist Linda Karshan; the first, *Marks*, was influenced by our conversations about poetry and the shared experience of being Americans in London, but also by a particular journey to her studio (in the snow, so the weather entered the poem), and my reaction to watching her work. Our most recent project, *Desire Paths*, was destined to be a book from the beginning, so I was responding not just to a series of Linda's woodcuts, but also to the demands of page scale and typography, and so a third collaborator was the printer, Hein Elferink. [Here](#) is an image from *Marks*.

More recently, I have produced *Formerly*, a book responding to the photographs of the editor and designer Vici MacDonald. It started as a way to get Vici to do something with the thousands of photos she's been taking over the years of the more unloved bits of London, many of which have become victims of the wrecking ball. Again, the poems were responding to already-existing images, but I was selecting the images as a way of assembling a narrative about London. Early on in the project, I decided all the poems should be sonnets, and so we ended up with 14 poems corresponding to 14 images. The book which Vici designed around the project is sonnet-sized, small enough to fit into a pocket, and printed on recycled paper, so that the materials reflect the ephemeral nature of the subject. [Here is a link](#).

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So that's a short history of my personal collaborations. What I have produced on each occasion I could not have written without such stimuli – I have been surprised by the directions that the poems have taken. Collaborations get you thinking differently, remove you from your own concerns and obsessions, and steer you into other realms.

Here are some suggestions for creating collaborations:

1. WORK WITH AN ARTIST PRACTISING IN ANOTHER GENRE.

I have always been interested in visual art, and so my collaborations with Linda and Vici, and with the sculptor Alison Gill and the potter Julian Stair, have all been natural extensions of my concerns. You may know visual artists, musicians, dancers, actors, photographers, filmmakers who are producing work that you admire and that you find inspiring. Such collaborations can go both ways – I have always responded to already-existing work; you may find an artist who is interesting in setting or interpreting an existing poem of yours. This sort of collaboration can be active and contemporary, in that you chose someone who is living and working right now, or it can be a communion with an artist who you do not know, who is no longer with us (I wrote a sequence of poems based on the life and work of the artist Jackson Pollock – he may not have been that easy to work with in real life, but our imaginary collaboration produced some fascinating poems!)

2. WORK WITH ANOTHER POET OR WRITER

The book *Messages* started out as a project between the writers Lynne Rees and Sarah Salway. They decided to write 300 pieces, each consisting of 300 words. The two authors took it in turns to exchange pieces by email, with a 72 hour deadline for each one. Each piece was to have some connection to the previous, be it through theme, character, or simply just a word or image. Lynne Rees describes the process as a 'widening of our writing boundaries, push[ing] us into places we might not have discovered, or entered, on our own . . . We also saw it as an exploration of writing as a "dialogue" because we'd be responding to each other's writing as readers, and then writers. And very importantly, we thought it would be fun.' A link to the book is [here](#).

More recently the poet Caleb Klaces set up the project [Likestarlings](#), which is described on the website as 'a place for talking in poems. We pair poets with poets and they write new works in collaboration with one another.' The poet Claire Crowther, who was paired by Likestarlings with Chris McCabe, described their collaboration as 'surprising':

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'First I wrote a poem, Chris read it and replied with a poem, I responded to that with another poem and so on for six poems. What I had not expected was that by my second poem I was talking to Chris through the poem. I have never had a similar experience of actually talking conversationally in poetry. It was exciting. This must be partly due to Chris being an exciting poet and I think choosing your collaborating poet is crucially important but it was also due to the structure of the collaboration. Writing a poem as you would construct a reply involved extra parameters to my usual set of requirements. Whatever it is that I normally do when I write was added to and that, I think, is what makes a successful collaboration.'

Instigate your own project with another poet. You can set any parameters you like. What the writers quoted above stress is that whatever you do should be fun, exhilarating, unplanned, and should act as a way to broaden your usual practice.

What I want to stress is that the coming together of two different artists produces something that neither of them could achieve on their own. And that's exciting. What collaboration gives us is a new way of working, a conversation about ideas and practice, a sharing of common ground, but also of what is unique and individual in our modes of expression.

1. *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*, Russell Ferguson (LA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1999)

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