

# A story of friendships ... mostly

Apart from the 4% of us who are sociopaths, we all participate with one another in our democracy, the workplace, education, business alliances, sport, partnerships and marriages. People have been thinking and working together for thousands of years. The splendor of such togetherness is in the revelation of unforeseen solutions flowing from well-intended people sharing conversation, experience, expertise, and very importantly, meals around one table. Presently we are as likely to find ourselves in Zoom meetings as in being physically together. Virtual meetings are a pitiful, synthetic copy of face to face encounters. The notion of collaboration should not be diluted nor transmogrified into the common, the quotidian, the material or the corporate as so many of our words and concepts have been. We used to have lunch with others. Now we do lunch.

I am a photographer, a profession generally and necessarily a rather solitary one, but human connection has always been important in my work. Three of my businesses (*Editions Michel Eyquem*) a publishing house for art and poetry books, a gallery (*The Bonnafont Gallery*) and a magazine devoted to my photography have fortunately provided me with multiple occasions for working with different artists.

The internet has transmuted shared physical space into a virtual one with upwards of millions of people remotely located. This potentially entails an exploitation and amounts to more of a compilation than a collaboration. Michael Schrage in his book *Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration* argues that collaborative space is now conceptual rather than physical. He however admits that “improving technological performance is easy, (but) elevating human intelligence is hard.” In my mind conceptual spaces make a dog’s breakfast of true collaboration.

The first records of the word collaboration come from the French in 1855–60. It derives from the Latin verb *collaborare*. The prefix means “together” and the heart of the word *labore*, means “work”: thus collaboration is working together. It didn’t come into common usage until the 20th century growing steadily since WWII.

The *Life of Samuel Johnson*, published in 1791 was written by James Boswell. Many have called it the greatest biography in English. Johnson nearly single-

handedly wrote the first comprehensive dictionary of the English language. They met when Boswell was 22 years of age and Johnson 54. Their relationship lasted for 21 years until Johnson's death. Being of differing political persuasions. Boswell a Whig and Johnson a staunch Tory remarked "... the first Whig was the Devil." Johnson saw in Boswell "a being whose human need for just what he had to give as very nearly desperate," and in a letter commenting on his excessive note taking said "One would think the man had been hired to spy upon me". Boswell's biography alters and censors some of Johnson's quotations with one critic suggesting that it should be called an aria. Many of his notes were taken over conversation in taverns, and record a sort of table talk. Johnson said "There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn."

Collaborations can be full of failures and false starts particularly if there is a predetermined pursuit, but there are exceptions. The express goal of The Wright Brothers, known as the fathers of flight, was to make a machine that could fly. A toy helicopter received from their father ignited their interest in aeronautics. As young entrepreneurs they published their own newspaper, invented a printing press and sold their own brand of bicycles. Their family was a fabulously fertile and nurturing environment. Their mother invented toys and both parents invented appliances. Wilber and Orville openly debated and understood intimately the other's strengths, weaknesses and contributions in making their partnership successful. Wilber was the businessman and Orville the inventor but they always shared equal credit. Shortly before his death Wilber said "nearly everything that was done in our lives has been the result of conversations, suggestions and discussion between us."

Spanning three decades, the collaboration between the opera composer Richard Strauss and the librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal is one of the most outstanding in all of classical music and the best documented because of their many letters. Hofmannsthal, comparatively withdrawn, preferred communicating with Strauss by correspondence. Their work together was not without conflict particularly during the creation of *Ariadne auf Naxos* which took them five years to complete. It is full of innovation becoming an advanced *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) the aesthetic ideal explored by Wagner. At one point disagreement led to a near breaking point. Hofmannsthal wrote, "I find myself misunderstood and injured by you at the most vulnerable point in our relationship as artists ... How in such circumstances am I to devote myself to writing another similar project?" Fortunately Strauss maintained his diplomatic poise thanking Hofmannsthal

for his “beautiful letter” and embellished his explanation saying “A superficial musician like myself could tumble to (what you have written). Perhaps I am out of sorts. I have been alone for four weeks while my wife is away and haven’t touched a cigarette for all that time. Let the devil himself be cheerful in such circumstances! In any case, I would ask you urgently to give me first refusal with anything composable that you write. Your manner has so much in common with mine. We were born for one another and are certain to do fine things together if you remain faithful to me.”

Though in music opera is perhaps the ultimate collaborative form, the string quartet is unique in its demands. Four musicians rehearsing, discussing, disagreeing, traveling together, performing, recording, often in a closer bond with one another than they share with their spouses. String quartets can resemble difficult marriages deemed worthy of preserving for mutual interests. Every performance demands a selflessness, with each player sacrificing his own ego for the demands of the interpretation. Personality conflicts often create more problems than aesthetic ones. With a career spanning forty-five years the Guarneri Quartet always had a one year plan. “If people hire us to perform next year, we’ll continue — if not, we’ll stop.” The Guarneri was essentially leaderless or as they might put it, they had four leaders and no followers. Their violist Michael Tree said “it’s a democracy and there’s nothing more balky and time-wasting than a democracy.” The violinist Arnold Steinberg said “the four of us behaved with one another almost as if we were brothers — that is, affectionate but often blunt. Direct and unflinching criticism allowed us to move along quickly on our way to forming a convincing interpretation. We never complimented one another. And because of that directness, we could walk away from rehearsals without any lingering resentments.” Their arguments about repertory were unending though their rehearsals would often begin with silly jokes as this from the violist: A wife says to her husband, “You are such a schmuck that if there were a schmuck competition, you’d come in second.” “Why is that?” he asks. “Because you’re such a schmuck.” When the quartet was on tour they guarded their privacy, socializing together as little as possible, even staying on different floors at hotels. About their career, Steinberg said “Was that a stroke of luck, or something far more elusive and mysterious?”

In 34 years the choreographer George Balanchine and the composer Igor Stravinsky created around 40 ballets. They are as important to ballet as Lennon and McCartney to song. Both were well read in the classics and intimate with the other’s discipline. Neither regarded his work as anything out of the ordinary,

except in quality. One made music, the other dance. Balanchine said “Just as a cabinetmaker must select his woods for the particular job at hand ... so a ballet carpenter must find a dominant quality of gesture, a stain or palette of consistent movement, an active scale of flowing patterns which reveals to the eye what Stravinsky tells the sensitized ear. The composer creates time, and we have to dance to it. God creates, I assemble.” It recalls Willie Mays modest statement: “They throw the ball, I hit it. They hit the ball, I catch it.” Balanchine’s musical knowledge allowed him to engage with Stravinsky on a profound level. Stravinsky commented that “if one wishes to choreograph successfully, then like Balanchine, one must be a musician first.” While working, Stravinsky would articulate his musical thoughts at the piano and Balanchine his choreographic ones through movement and gesture. In a process of reduction and clarification they redefined ballet, stripping it of its dependence on narrative and spectacle into a purely classical form. Balanchine learned from Stravinsky to be satisfied with what one has made. Stravinsky would say that his model for this attitude was from God, who on the days when he had created lovely flowers, trees and birds was satisfied, and on the days he had created crawling insects and slimy reptiles was equally satisfied.

Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, the Argentinian writers had a forty year creative partnership collaborating on essays, anthologies, film scripts, stories and a novel. Working under the pen name Honorio “Bugsy” Bustos Domecq, a pseudonym that combines their family names, they wrote parodies of detective stories with characters who consult an investigator confined to a jail cell who looks with a seemingly innocent eye at the absurdities of Argentine life. Their intention was to satirize Argentinian society along with disguised critiques of right-wing politics. The writer Alberto Manguel said “Working together in one of the back rooms of Bioy’s apartment, they reminded me of alchemists assembling a homunculus, creating something that was a combination of both men and yet was unlike either of them.” Their unified voice is neither as cerebral as that of Borges nor as satirical as that of Casares.

Picasso had two significant collaborators, one with the painter Braque during the discovery of Cubism. Picasso speaking of him later said “Braque is my wife... my ex-wife.” His collaboration with Brassai the Hungarian photographer began with a commission from the influential Surrealist publication *Minotaure*. Each artist was of signal importance in the 20th century. Picasso known for being demanding concerning documentation of his work was fully approving of Brassai’s works. Brassai embellishing a quote from Jean Giono said “Reality

pushed to the extreme, leads to unreality. To go straight to things is to accept their magic..." It was during the Second World War during the occupation in Paris that their friendship fully blossomed. They were both foreigners in Paris, and found congruity in shared aesthetic interests. Contributive to their working together was that they shared an aversion for focusing on a single discipline. From the earliest days, Brassaï would make notes of their conversations which he kept in a box. Thirty years later he showed them to Picasso who suggested on the spot that they should be published. They became the source for the book *Conversations avec Picasso*. It is a singular and important document describing every day life in Paris under Nazi occupation, two decades of Picasso's life, their working methods and friendship. Picasso was to say "If you want to know me, read Brassaï's book."

Something which often distinguishes scientific collaborations from others is that they depend on a community of contributors not the least being their wealthy backers. James Watson and Francis Crick, beginning with ideas from 1869 of the Swiss chemist Friedrich Miescher discovered the double helix structure of DNA. Though Watson and Crick are popularly given complete credit, the research of many others was essential: namely Rosalind Franklin, and Maurice Wilkins. The complete story is complicated and well documented. Watson has been widely criticized for what is considered an ethical impropriety in his failure to recognize the contributions of others. A strong friendship was the foundation of their working together along with being motivated by competitive rivals. Crick was better at high-level mathematics and Watson knew about DNA replication. Comparative newcomers, they were willing to explore approaches that established scientists tended to reject outright. They brainstormed using cardboard cutouts of chemical compounds on a table as though assembling a puzzle.

Partners in life, the British artists Gilbert & George have been working together for fifty years. Since their college days they have dressed identically in formal tweed suits which can seem at odds with their iconoclastic works which tackle death, religion, the monarchy, patriotism, identity and sexuality. They believe that good taste is the scourge of modern life. Their art is deliberately controversial and designed to offend. They first attained recognition in a performance piece called *Living Sculptures* in which they would paint themselves in metallic makeup and walk through London. Given their concept that art becomes life and life becomes art, living together was their way of merging the two. Today Gilbert & George are an elderly couple often seen



strolling around East London where they live. For twenty-five years, five nights a week they have eaten at the same Turkish restaurant where they have become a spectacle along with the celebrated food. They said of the restaurant “We saw that it featured testicles and we thought: ‘Wow, tablecloths and testicles’, and we never looked back.”

The extreme of this kind of collaboration were the performance artists Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano, a man and woman who spent an entire year tied together with an eight foot rope and were not allowed to touch one another.

Amy Trachtenberg, a visual artist and I have made books in accordion form known as leporellos. We pursued it much as in the drawing game The Exquisite Corpse which the Surrealists played in order to reveal extraordinary, unpredictable combinations unavailable to the rational mind. It consists in the drawing of a human-like figure, the players contributing secretly, section by section from head to foot, only unveiling the completed drawing when finished. Each one of our books were begun without theme or constraint with sizes ranging from that of a pocket-sized book to quite large. One of us would create something for the first page, then hand it off to the other to continue the dialogue on subsequent pages without looking at the whole until we had finished. It was a process of discovery rather than one of response. We lived across San Francisco from one another so with the back and forth the books took several months to realize. Our collaborations are ongoing to this day.

My friendship with René Fontaine a Swiss thinker and historian born in 1915 began when we were neighbors for a few years on Telegraph Hill. After he moved to St. Helena we fashioned a book project in order to extend creatively the lively rapport we had established. He had in his home many small objects, sculptures and collectibles. We determined that he would write about a few and I would create images of them using my camera, with no intention of simple illustration and often in elaborate constructs. Working independently, after completing eight we put them together to see if they worked as a whole. It was gratifying if not surprising that we were in complete agreement with what the other had created. It was published as *This Book is an Object*. We approached Jack Stauffacher to design and print it with his press which he accepted to do. It was my first encounter with creating a fine handcrafted book with a master printer. This endeavor with Stauffacher took a couple of years to realize, and accelerated a constant working relationship with him lasting from 1988 until his death in 2017.

Jack Werner Stauffacher was an American printer, graphic designer, typographer, educator and letterpress book publisher. He always referred to himself as simply “Jack the printer.” A Fulbright Scholarship took him to Florence in the 50s for three years before forming *The New Laboratory Press* at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. After designing books at Stanford he opened *The Greenwood Press* in 1966 at 300 Broadway in San Francisco followed by teaching at The SF Art Institute and the University of California Santa Cruz.

My collaboration with Jack was first and foremost a friendship. Formality was key to our alliance throughout the decades we worked together. When working with a friend it is frequently pleasurable. He took care of my design and printing needs and me his image and photography needs. At the outset we would work on Fridays but I would only go to his studio if he had called on the previous Wednesday. As though a scripted and repeating tango, he would introduce himself with “Good morning Dennis, it’s your old pal Jack” followed by “what’s going on in the world?” Being an autodidact he sought input from friends, colleagues and casual conversations in cafes to help him piece together the news of the day and the general tide of cultural opinion. I found myself getting up earlier than usual to read the Times, Guardian and whatever else to be prepared with a distilled and informed response. We would only discuss current events for a few minutes before moving on to the core of our interest; our work. He would then ask as though casually, “how about lunch this week?” and as though responding to a fresh question I would answer “yes, that would be wonderful.” He would then ask “how about this Friday?” and after a mannered hesitation I would say “yes that works.” There were never any presumptions made nor petulant sensitivities harbored with respect being the central feature of our relations.

We would launch into all manner of reverie about books, art, culture, and history. In addition to our ongoing dialogue about classical music, we discovered that we shared a deeply-seated and singular aesthetic agreement. We each independently had been transfixed by the harmonic, symmetrical beauty of the 11th Century facade of the *Badia Fiesolana* monastery. It was unexpected in that it is one of the more overlooked churches in Tuscany. From such gentle exchanges were born our various projects. We would clash and debate and laugh and probe and critique in a very unstructured way with neither design nor intent for weeks until as though surprised one of us would say “we should make this” or “do that.”

One day long before there was even the concept of casual Fridays I arrived at his studio wearing a sport coat and blue jeans to which he simply commented “jeans?” He always dressed in a sport coat and a bow tie with a freshly picked yellow marguerite in the buttonhole of his lapel. Though 34 years my senior when we were out together I noticed women intrigued by him and ignoring me. So I began to dress more formally for our meetings. We would have a simple lunch at one of the many inexpensive places to be found in North Beach. Once on leaving a particularly noisy, conversation cancelling restaurant he simply remarked “let’s not go here anymore... too many loud women.”

Some years later our meetings amplified to include more colleagues, ultimately becoming an aesthetic salon of some renown meeting at 901 Columbus Cafe. Visiting British designer Michael Harvey christened these Friday lunches “The Friday Fools” in that it was at times a gathering of the over-talented and underemployed.

The earliest guilds were first formed in ancient India and Rome and existed in the Middle Ages throughout Europe. They were groups of individuals with common goals and a sense of solidarity and belonging. Jack would speak of our Friday group as the “guild.” Occasionally when some one of us displayed a lack of idealism, discipline, generosity or professionalism Jack would seriously ask “don’t you want to be in the guild?” No money exchanged hands between us except when publications, projects and exhibitions realized together proved remunerative.

A perhaps surprising aspect of my affiliation with Stauffacher, was that he understood little about photography and I even less about design and typography. His was not a normal pedagogy. I learned design concepts easily from him and in spite of myself. Most of my refined understanding of the book arts came under his rather accidental tutelage. In our best moments it could seem to me as though we were little boys in a sandbox, exploring, creating, researching, talking and when the adults were out of the room giggling.

Our working methods were different: he with a seeming reluctance to finish projects and me with a dogged insistence on pursuing things to conclusion. Two seemingly antithetical tendencies benefitting one from the other. I became known as one of the few who could induce Jack to complete projects. It was revealing to discover that what I thought to be his procrastination was fruitful



in allowing time to divulge differing perspectives. His process was conscious, knowing, purposeful and strategic.

Jack's international reputation meant that his press became a mecca for designers, printers and artists. Replete with hundreds of books it was an inspiring oasis offering a magical panoply of treasures, printed gems, a cornucopia of conversation, generosity of idea and dialectical challenges. My gallery in North Beach had a cottage apartment above it. Frequently visiting colleagues would stay there. It was a free space where hours and after hours could be spent with abandon and flourishing possibility. Collaborations benefit in a space out of the normal course of living.

The book *Inscriptions* conceived by Jack is about the inscriptions above the Piazzoni murals in the old main San Francisco Public Library. It was produced in the heat of the debate to convert the library into the Asian Art Museum. Nicholson Baker wrote a scathing piece about the challenges presented by the new main library building in the *New Yorker* entitled *The Author vs the Library*. It was an altogether controversial move in several regards and a moment of discord in San Francisco with scorching enmity between the opposing factions. At one contentious meeting with the architect Gae Aulenti in attendance Jack was pointing at her from the podium and said "you are turning our sacred library into a mall." Our book has essays by type designers, a geographer, Jack and my photographs of the inscriptions. The photographs were taken with very little light or time and a security guard watching my every move. As the project developed it found me traveling to Detroit, Boston and Paris to photograph libraries placing the San Francisco library as the last of four in a noble line of Beaux-Arts architectural antecedents.

The portfolios I made with Jack based on the writings of the Italian Enlightenment philosopher Giambattista Vico were perhaps our most original contribution. A collaboration of a philosopher, a printer and a photographer. Vico's ideas developed in three evolving editions of his chef-d'oeuvre *The New Science*; a steady percolation and expansion of his thought. To hold in one's hand an original Vico edition is to experience the portal he chose to share his ideas with us all: the book.

In today's art world too much has been sacrificed in the pursuit of originality at all costs in which intentional ahistoricism is preferred to a refined, modest, historically aware statement. This tendency can generate intentionally

misleading and mendacious expressions of view and fact.

Our Vico creations were thoroughly researched and deeply considered. They represent a questioning and more of a starting point than a finishing one. Jack was an inveterate scholar, but being dyslexic a bit of a misreader. I needed to reconsider Vico through his prism. He concentrated mostly on Vico's axioms and extracted them from their context in an almost postmodern way. Our disagreements would arise when I had to write lectures explaining our graphical works and how they related to Vico. At times they needed to include aspects of Vico's writings that Jack would have preferred overlooked particularly his fantastical cosmogony. Singularly sobering was when in mid-lecture I saw walk into the auditorium Sandra Luft one of the two leading Vico scholars in America. On timidly approaching her afterwards and prepared to accept a lashing I was relieved to find her glowing in her approval.

I became over time something like the court photographer of *The Greenwood Press*. Having an abhorrence for paparazzi methods of catching someone in out of character or embarrassing moments it was a few years before I subjected Jack to my lens. He forever remained a resistant subject. To distract, I would tell him that I was trying out a new camera, technique, or series, which tended to lull him into cooperation. The images fit into the long photographic history of extended portraits. My photographs of him became a published volume called *Unfinished conversation*. I sometimes think that it's a pity I didn't collect my conversations with Jack as Brassai had done with Picasso but it might be that my photographs of him are in some regard similar.

Our collaborative works are now ensconced in the closely guarded grasp of archives, collections, libraries and book shelves. But the jewels of having created them are what remain for me fresh and alive. Time has allowed me to believe that I was privileged in working with both such an extraordinary and gifted though at times difficult man. I am endlessly grateful. Even now I recall moments or events with him in a new light and these newborn revelations surface as fresh inspiration.

Brian Eno has been involved in an experimental documentary about his life and work with the director Gary Hustwit. Using a generative technology (*Brain One* an anagram of Eno's name) as a creative partner, segments of the film are seen in a different order with each viewing. One can only imagine the anarchic assault on rationality and logic were essays randomly presented.

With the incursion of artificial intelligence affecting so many aspects of our lives, and the rights of the human labor powering it, which one of us can predict where these monocultural technologies will take us? Will Chat GPT (Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer) or Grammarly be considered henceforth as collaborators?

The waning of interpersonal connections is accelerating the deterioration of much that we hold very dear. Athena is the goddess of reason. A friend would yearly on Thanksgiving make the toast: “Reason is very sick but she will never die.”

Dennis Letbetter 2024

*This Book is an Object*, 1989

*Tulips*, 1992, Editions Michel Eyquem

*Shared Minds: The New Technologies of Collaboration*, Michael Schrage 1990, Random House

*The Author vs the Library*, Nicholson Baker, October 6, 1996, *New Yorker*

*The Beams of Montaigne’s Library*, 1996 *The Greenwood Press*

*Jane*, 2000 *The Greenwood Press*

*Inscriptions* 2003 *The Book Club of California*, *SF Public Library*

*Vico. Two Portfolios* 2003

*The Vico Collaboration*, 2003 *The Greenwood Press*

*Vico Duodecimo Axiom 65*, 2006 *The Greenwood Press*

*Oxen, Plough, Bicycle*, 2017 *The Greenwood Press*

*Unfinished conversation*, 2018 Editions Michel Eyquem

letterpress broadsides

exhibitions/lectures