

## **A personal desire for definition: Collaboration is not the same as co-operation**

In the discourse around arts practices, I often find myself confronted by the use/mis-use of the term collaboration. As someone who has been engaged for a prolonged period in this way of working, I have felt the need to define/re-define this term – it seems to me so useful, it would be a shame to lose its potential as a term that denotes a very particular working arrangement – one that I see as quite distinct from a more simple co-operation (working together).

I'd like to express a desire to 'save' the term collaboration to describe a way of working between two or more people, where the creative process confuses authorship to the extent that none of the collaborators can identify elements (or contributions) that are solely 'theirs' – generating a product that is 'shared' rather than claimed solely by any one contributor. It is with this sense of collaboration in mind that I am attempting to unpack my position as a co-creator of the work produced under the moniker LOW PROFILE.

This wilful confusion of authorship, ownership and accountability, of course, presents complications in the academic situation – how can I present (any of) this practice, this work or these ideas as truly 'my own', and more particularly, 'my own unaided work'?

### **11. Author's Signed Declaration\***

If your work has been part of a collaborative group project, a declaration must be made to indicate clearly your own individual contribution and the form and extent of collaboration.

\* from *Protocols and Conventions for Dissertations* (MA Guidelines document), University College Falmouth incorporating Dartington College of Arts

In a similar way, it is unhelpful (if not, unachievable) to begin to indicate, list or tally 'my own' individual contributions – to do so seems to reduce the situation of collaboration (an intricate, interdependent working relationship that relies on shared ownership rather than individual possession) to one of co-operation (synonymous with less complex notions of helping each other out, assisting one another, or working together towards an identifiable aim).

My intention in producing this statement (as one half of the collaboration LOW PROFILE) is not an attempt to plagiarise or 'pass off' the work created by LOW PROFILE as simply 'my own', or to evade scrutiny of how the work was developed, but to acknowledge that this practice, this work and these ideas are produced through (and informed by) a collaboration where we each (as heterogeneous individuals) take equal/shared/joint credit, responsibility and attribution for what is created.

**Who is this we?**

The word "we" suggests a manifesto, something that is bigger than "I" or "me".  
"We" suggests conspiratorial activity. "We" suggests a promise, pledge or commitment.  
"We" suggests an equal agreement.

**We are in this together.**

When Hannah was studying for her MA, she was asked to write down (to make a list of) the things that she was responsible for within the work that we had produced as LOW PROFILE. The institution wanted her to define and separate whose ideas were whose, who had done what and what work was identifiably hers.

We realised at this point that a list like this would be disastrous to a/our collaboration – undermining what we had built by introducing greed, individual possession and ego.

**Who is this we?**

In our writing, when we (LOW PROFILE) talk of “we”, we are talking of ourselves as a collaborative duo and the space where our beliefs, concerns and ideas intersect (becoming shared), but at times, we are also hinting towards the simultaneous suggestions of “we” widening its definition to include the audience.

**The form and extent of the collaboration**

We are involved in (and committed to) developing work in a conversational way – trying to work things out through talking, going to see things (i.e. films, exhibitions, performances) together, friendship, (sometimes) getting drunk, telling each other about things we have seen or read, and writing collaboratively - generating ‘sanctioned’ texts. This leads to a situation where stability is achieved through each comma/every detail being discussed, cases being put forward, argument erupting and so on, until the resulting texts or ideas become ‘stable’.

Faithfully documenting this process would require a constant state of data collection (which in itself would be undesirable and almost unmanageable), and once the implications of the request for such detail have been properly considered, the resulting document - imagine a series of interlinked/hypertextual documents where each word is accounted for by an unlimited series of ‘track changes’ marks - is also not a tally that would be particularly legible, let alone insightful, interesting or useful to those producing it.

## **Where do the individual contributions go?**

When I think about collaboration, and especially when I find myself looking through a 'paper-trail' that inadvertently documents the process of working together (emails, notes, drafts etc.), I wonder about how this process affects what gets picked up, what is left behind and what ends up being worked into the 'final' piece, text or idea.

I'm thinking about this not so much in terms of keeping score (I'm not very interested in this and hence an excellent person to play badminton against) but more in terms of this not being so visible in a solo creative practice where the decisions are made by one individual.

I find it fascinating that on a different day, we could easily choose a different set of solutions (there are always more possibilities than we can ever use) – this tacit process of **formulating** (first through individual thought processes), **presenting** (talking about/sharing ideas and fragments), **testing** (often individual thought process – does it make sense to you too?), **considering** (where could this go?), **re-formulating** (a formation of shared/agreed ideas or directions), **re-presenting** (beginning to 'make' something) and **re-testing** (does it work?/how does it work? etc).

I think I have forgotten how people do this in a solo practice (I forget sometimes how working 'alone' might even be possible, let alone desirable!) – when can the process not start to involve other people?

**We are in this together.**

**Rachel Dobbs**  
(LOW PROFILE)  
2009

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FOR	AGAINST
ALL THE STUFF I WOULD NEVER HAVE THOUGHT OF	ALL THE STUFF I WOULD NEVER HAVE THOUGHT OF
WORKING THINGS OUT THROUGH CONVERSATION	WORKING THINGS OUT THROUGH CONVERSATION
COLLABORATION ENCOURAGES DEPENDENCY	COLLABORATION ENCOURAGES DEPENDENCY
NOT BEING BOUND UP ONLY IN YOUR OWN IDEAS	NOT BEING BOUND UP ONLY IN YOUR OWN IDEAS
TAKES A LONG TIME	TAKES A LONG TIME
REQUIRES A 'SHAREDNES' - AN OPEN UNDISPUTED AGREEMENT, A MUTUAL RESPECT	REQUIRES A 'SHAREDNES' - AN OPEN UNDISPUTED AGREEMENT, A MUTUAL RESPECT
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MAINTAINING AND RE-MANAGING OF WORK	MAINTAINING AND RE-MANAGING OF WORK

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR A LIVE WRITING PIECE:**

(to be written while speakers read out their thoughts on collaboration - talking for 2 minutes, twice)

Copy the diagram overleaf, beginning with the headings FOR and AGAINST. Fill in the text on the left column first, followed by the text on the right column.

[THIS PAGE FEATURES INSIDE THE BACK COVER OF THE BOOKLET - see image above]