

DanⁿCing in Your Chair

Six Artists on Collaboration

CHRISTINA OLIVARES AND JENNY WILLIAMS

What better way to explore collaborative art than through a collaborative interview? T&W Fellows Christina Olivares and Jenny Williams reached out to writers, musicians, and artists working collaboratively and invited them to share their thoughts on the process in brief “haiku interviews.” Below is a selection of responses from six individuals, four of whom answered in their collaborative pairs, and two of whom—to our surprise and delight—actually answered in haiku.

Musician and composer **David Grubbs (DG)** has released ten solo albums, the most recent of which is *An Optimist Notes the Dusk* (Drag City). His current work includes collaborations with poet Susan Howe and visual artists Anthony McCall and Angela Bulloch. Grubbs is an assistant professor in the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College, CUNY, as well as director of Brooklyn College’s graduate programs in Performance and Interactive Media Arts (PIMA).

Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion (MD/LS) are Scotland-based artists who have worked in collaboration since 1993; their studio creates artworks in photography, video, sound, and sculpture that explore new artistic languages surrounding the subject of ecology. The studio regularly collaborates with musicians, naturalists, philosophers, and scientists to make artworks that visualize aspects of our shared environment from alternative perspectives, and to re-establish and re-evaluate our engagement with the non-human species we live alongside.

John Yau (JY) is a poet, critic, and co-publisher of The Brooklyn Rail/Black Square Editions. Since the early 1980s, he has collaborated with artists, poets, and musicians. He first collaborated with Thomas Nozkowski on the book *Ing Grish* (Saturnalia, 2005). Currently, he and Nozkowski are working on *Egyptian Sonnets*, a book of poems and prints which they will design. The book will be published by the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Papermaking (RCIPP).

Christina Olivares is the Teachers & Writers 2008–2009 Curriculum Fellow. Olivares is a poet, boxer, and youth advocate who lives in West Harlem. She has a BA from Amherst and is in the MFA program in poetry at Brooklyn College. Her work has been published in nth zine, Rorschach Failure, the Brooklyn Review, and the Acentos Literary Review. She has worked at the youth program Harlem RBI and in the New York City Department of Education.

Jenny Williams is the Teachers & Writers Communications Fellow for 2008–2009. She holds a BA in English from UC Berkeley. After spending several years abroad—including six months volunteering in Uganda and South Sudan—she returned to the US, where she currently works as a freelance developmental book editor. Her writing has appeared in Prick of the Spindle, Raving Dove, Flashquake, Pology, and Matador.

Denise Duhamel and David Trinidad (DD/DT). Denise Duhamel co-edited, with Maureen Seaton and David Trinidad, *Saints of Hysteria: A Half-Century of Collaborative American Poetry* (Soft Skull Press, 2007), and has published collaborative works with a number of poets. An associate professor at Florida International University, her most recent solo books are *Ka-Ching!; Two and Two*; and *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (all from University of Pittsburgh Press.)

David Trinidad's collaborative books include *By Myself* (with D.A. Powell) and *Phoebe 2002: An Essay in Verse* (with Lynn Crosbie and Jeffery Conway), both published by Turtle Point Press. He co-edited *Saints of Hysteria* and teaches poetry at Columbia College Chicago, where he co-edits the journal *Court Green*.

How do you define collaboration?

DG: I've never tried. But since you've asked, I'll suggest that **collaboration is a process of creation that could not have occurred with only a single individual.**

MD/LS: Collaboration is when more than one person contributes to the idea, shaping, and authorship of an artwork. Sometimes we employ people to contribute to part of building a piece of work or helping with an installation, but we would not call this collaboration in the real sense of the word.

JY: I don't have a strict definition. It involves two or more people. The resulting piece (work) can only have come from the exchange between the participants. None of the individuals could have made it on their own.

DD/DT:

One poet writes one thing, then the other poet writes another thing.

What is the most exciting part of collaboration?

MD/LS: Through collaborating with someone I had a new way of thinking about a subject, giving more

JY: The dialogue, which often shares something with the interchange is the work; and that it is polyvocal and informed as well as inspired by the other. You do not have chosen. You become conscious of a different perspective, and this can be useful with

DD/DT:

When you have a surprise you do

folks involved in experience I discovered the best way

MD/LS: We actually guides such as book foresters, farmer creative ro

JY: I generally

DD/DT:

P had of immediate to the poem

Do you tend to collaborate within your own genre or field, or work with artists from other genres?

DG:

The latter. I was spoiled when I started playing with the

Red Krayola [an avant-garde rock band formed in 1966]; it seemed that half of the

in the group at that time were visual artists, and that was my art school. From that I discovered that collaborating with artists from another discipline is a good way to school yourself in otherwise unfamiliar practices.

I usually tend to work mostly with people from outside our own field; in addition to field ecologists, ornithologists and entomologists, we have worked with sound artists, composers, architects, dancers, and are currently developing a project with anthropologists. We all have a role to play in the project, but we're not duplicating areas of expertise.

I usually work with visual artists.

DT:

David tends to stay close to words, while Denise plays with the visual.

DG: Immersion into another person's work. I studied poetry as a graduate student, but I've never had anything approaching the marvelous experience of immersing myself in repeating readings of and listenings of poems by Susan Howe for which I've created music.

For some organization, we are aware that they can bring a focus to our body of work.

With "call and response." By this I mean that what arises out of one medium is taken up across different mediums. Each contribution is a response to go in a direction that one might not expect from your work, and the implications of its internal logic, from which you are not collaborating.

When your partner writes a line, it makes a difference in your chair.

What qualities do you look for in a collaborator?

DG: Not insane? Also: someone who wants to learn about what it is that I do.

MD/LS: It seems to work for us if we have something in common with the people we are collaborating with. This does not mean we have to like the person but they may have an aesthetic that we like or feel is quite exciting, or we may like the way they think about their work.

JY: Being open and unpredictable.

DD/DT:

Brains. Muscle. Glowing cheeks. Good hair. Spontaneous adjectival leaps.

When you work collaboratively, do you prefer to do your joint work in person or remotely?

DG:
In every possible combination—to see what works best for that particular relationship.

MD/LS: We prefer to meet person-to-person, at least at the beginning, even if it's not always possible. Although remote

working can be successful, the intimacy of discussing the work face-to-face is lost.

JY: I have worked both jointly and remotely, and do not think one is better or worse than the other.

DD/DT:

E-mails and phone calls in pajamas work best unless poets shack up.

How does collaboration stretch your interests and abilities?

MD/LS:

others will have a far greater impact on you. It takes you on a new journey outside your comfort zone, often requires us to become exponentially more open-mindedness to learn new things from each other's minds, eyes, or ears.

JY: In some instances, particularly in the live presentation of words and thoughts.

DD/DT:

How does your creative process work differently when you collaborate versus when you work independently?

DG: I have to explain myself. And I thus usually have a more objective perspective on what I do. It can be painful, no doubt, hearing yourself yammer and stammer your way through preliminary ideas.

MD/LS: In a way our practice is an ongoing process of collaboration as we never make work individually, but always as Dalziel + Scullion. We are used to multiple authors contributing toward the end result, so an element of compromise within individuals is necessary so that the end result is greater than the sum of the parts.

JY: It's different because you are working with, as well as responding to, another person's assertions.

DD/DT:

When we work alone we stew in own juice; as two we blend pink smoothies.

DG: Abilities: because people ask you to do things for which you have no clue. Interests: because you get to peer over their shoulder. To pretend to be them, distantly.

LS: When you collaborate with others, there is a high probability that the knowledge and experience of their field of expertise, and therefore they can slide out of your own comfort zone. This journey, whether physical or intellectual, is exposed to new material, writing, film, ideas, etc., and so demands an openness to new things and experience the world through different

Especially when the work is displayed on the wall, I have had to consider the visual speed at which they are comprehended.

It forces us to learn new dance steps and master forms such as haiku.

How do you handle competing visions for a collaborative project?

DG: I have to check my impulses to steamroller the person with whom I'm working.

MD/LS: We generally all have to argue the case for each of our ideas or visions for the project very robustly. We then have a discussion to see if one vision is supported by the majority of the team. If we are working with a new collaborator, this situation can be very delicate and needs to be handled sensitively and in a positive manner.

JY: Almost all the collaborations that I have been involved with have evolved out of a series of preliminary conversations in which the framework of the proposed work becomes clearly defined.

DD/DT:

We trade sunglasses and surrender our car keys.
"You drive for a while."

How do you and your collaborators know when a work is finished?

DG: Oh, that differs with every project. I will say that I can be trusted to work without a deadline. The projects with Susan Howe and Anthony McCall have been without deadlines, and I love not knowing when the work will be finished. That is a real luxury.

MD/LS: Most of the time, a deadline will determine the cutoff point for a work. If it is in the public realm, it has to be delivered on a certain date to fit with an exhibition or performance date or a contractor's deadline, etc. With other works, you sometimes get the chance to refine them for subsequent showings where minor adjustments can be made.

JY: When nothing else can be done to it.

DD/DT:

The last period
should be sufficiently smudged.
"Do you think it's done?"

Having had a collaborative experience, do you see any changes in your approach to independent work?

DG: Other than the desire to renounce it entirely?

JY: It has helped me become more open and spontaneous.

DD/DT:

Yes. In fact, now we twist freely, having two-stepped with a deft partner.

On the following pages, p. 13: cover images of *Oyl* and *Little Novels*, published by Pearl Editions, Long Beach, California.
p. 14: *Source* (2007), still from 18-minute long video installation by Dalziel + Scullion.
p. 15: *Drift* (2001), photographic images on digital canvas, on timber frames by Dalziel + Scullion.

Denise Duhamel
& Maureen Seaton



LITTLE NOVEL



ye

Denise Duhamel & Maureen Seaton



