

# The Art of Collaboration

Tiko Kerr | Otoniya J. Okot Bitek

Of all the artistic disciplines, perhaps the most closely linked are those of the poet and the painter. Both strive to create a distilled reflection of experience through a singular object or form; they share an independence of time - the artwork is seen (read) and absorbed in a way that is focused on the here and now; but both poetry and painting also allow for the understanding of a piece to grow and change, driven by the ongoing development of the viewer / reader's own sensibilities as they gain life experience, establishing connections through the work to other poems, other paintings, other histories.

Collaboration between poets and painters makes a lot of sense, and we have many examples of art movements throughout history in which the poet and the painter were linked in a symbiotic relationship. Some notable examples include Symbolism (c.1880), a cultural movement that began as a reaction against naturalism and realism, which strove to represent absolute truths symbolically through language and metaphorical images; Dada (c.1915), which stressed nonsense, irrationality and a rejection of bourgeois taste; and the New York School (c. 1950), populated by poets, painters, dancers and musicians and based around ideas represented most clearly by abstract painting, particularly Abstract Expressionism. These movements all shared the context of specific cultural and social ideas coming to the fore, with broad-based recognition of the theories and forms in art practices that were being discussed and created.

We live in a time when cultural ideas are dispersed and vary widely. There are no overriding art movements that define our era. Pluralism and diversity drive cultural production, so collaborative efforts have become personal, a creative endeavour between artists who share sympathetic experiences and approaches, that may not necessarily be evident in their individual practices.

The relationship between the written and the visual is often made clear during the collaborative process, where both forms of artistic expression can share the same space. However, many collaborations take the form of sharing the same *space*, (intellectual and creative) but not necessarily the same *form*. The influence and impact of each on the other, comes about through the give and take of ideas and approaches to the work, or the interpretation of one form into the other – i.e. the illustration of a book of poems by an artist (as in the many collaborative works by the American artist Alex Katz) or the attempt to capture the experience of looking at a work of art in poetic form (as in the Russian Artist Max Weber's book 'Cubist Poems' from 1916).

With Tiko Kerr and Otoniya J. Okot Bitek we have an example of a collaboration informed by a sharing of the same space, created through conversations, correspondence, and reflection on the work of the other, but also a sharing of the same form, the literal combining of the physical and tangible – text and image – into an object that contains both the individual and collaborative voices of the artists.

This is clearly exemplified in the three B&W mixed-media paintings (*if loved, if planted, if growed*) that utilize Kerr's painting and graphic elements with extracted text from Okot Bitek's poems, in works that physically and conceptually overlay the poets and painters work through the use of clear vinyl sheets suspended over digitally printed and enlarged collage paintings. Each of the pieces incorporates fragments from one of the three preliminary versions of Okot Bitek's poem *if becomes when*, shared with Kerr early in the process, that became reference points for the development of the works in the exhibition. The final version of *if becomes when* is printed and mounted directly on its own wall in the exhibition, creating a poem work sharing, on equal terms, the 'space' of the exhibition with the paintings, sculptures and collages of Kerr.

The poem *if becomes when*, is in many ways a summary of the process of collaboration between the artists, containing the concepts that connect their work – seen and being seen, the visible, invisible and hypervisual, memory and identity – that Okot Bitek, a black woman, and Kerr, a gay man, experience and incorporate into their world view on a continual basis.

Both artists stress the benefits of the collaborative process that is at the heart of the exhibition and acknowledge it has influenced their individual approaches to art making – Okot Bitek states that it has helped her to shift the focus in her work from 'meaning making towards poetry as visual and immersive space'. Kerr asserts that for him the experience has expanded his boundaries, enabling him to 'generate works that may have been improbable, if not impossible, when working individually'. These outcomes speak to the limitless possibilities of artistic collaboration, and remind us that to understand the other is to understand ourselves.

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