

Richard Hell on collaboration



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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2963 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Anxiety](#).

Collaborations have been significant for me my whole work life. It was through a collaboration that I determined it was time to play music. The book of poems *Wanna Go Out?* was published in 1973, attributed to Theresa Stern. It was written in 1971 when I was 21. It's a collaboration with Tom Verlaine. I'd been struggling to write a good poem since I was 17—and it was a struggle. I would produce this or that, which I thought I did well enough, but I didn't feel satisfied with any of it. I felt constrained. I hadn't hit on a conception of the work that resolved it at all for me. I gradually improved, gradually realized things, but it was the act of writing *Wanna Go Out?* that finally seem achieved, and because I felt like I'd achieved something writing that book, it freed me to leave poetry and move into music.

Tom Verlaine was my friend from high school. After I dropped out of high school and came to New York, he came up to New York himself about a year later, and we spent a lot of time together. We were both interested in books and poetry and eventually we started writing collaborations. After a while, I noticed that the collaborations had a character of their own—it wasn't like either of us, so I got the idea of doing a whole body of poems in the persona of somebody else, and *Wanna Go Out?* was the result.

I love that about collaboration. It frees you from self-consciousness. It makes the poem something that you're doing for fun and pleasure and mental challenge. You have this stimulus of what the other person has just produced, and you play off one another. You can subvert it, you can extend it, you can take it in a direction suggested by one word in it. You get out of yourself. For me, that was really useful. I've found that I've never stopped liking collaborating. To be that intimately involved with how somebody else's mind works in the same arena as you're in, and that you're bouncing off of each other in that way, is just freeing and inspiring.

People think of poems as being personal expression, or paintings, or any medium. So as a rule, collaborations are thought of as being minor. But I respect collaborations and I'm fascinated by them. In my own work I think of the collaborations as being equal to the works I create alone, and I've learned a lot from doing them. For one thing, as I said, they free you from self-consciousness. To me, that's always been a challenge, that state of facing a blank page, or for a painting a blank canvas, where it's like all of a sudden the spotlight is turned on you and you've got to perform, no boundaries, and you just become paralyzed with self-consciousness.

Collaboration frees you from that because it's more like you're constructing something with these given stimuli. That's the way I collaborate. Like, the way it originally was, with a typewriter, you would simply write a line or two, and hand it to the other person, and they would write a line or two and hand it back. It's the work itself that matters, rather than your being. In a way, it's like the advantages of having a constraining form, which artists have recognized forever. A sonnet's a 14 line poem with a certain structure of statements and resolutions and a rhyme scheme—and there are much more complex and artificial forms than sonnets—and, kind of counter-intuitively, the rules can free the writer, because having those rules can get the artist out of his or her own habitual reflexive ways of thinking and writing, and while you're focusing on the form's criteria a fresher poem can inhabit the lines you're crafting. Collaboration can work the same way.

As I said about *Wanna Go Out?*, it can also beneficially influence the work you do on your own. When Christopher Wool and I did the book, *Psychopts*, in 2008, it ended up having an effect on both of our subsequent work. He hadn't made one of his word paintings since before the 2000s. I think his last word painting was from 1998. Each

of our collaborations in the book uses two words. The word pairs originate from a list that I've kept for decades, documenting an experience I've had reading, which is that I'm reading a page and before I know it, my eye jumps to a word on the page, something that's just in my peripheral vision, and my mind takes me to another word. It's a subconscious impulse. The phenomenon is below the conscious, because it happens before I even know I'm doing it. The word is by definition some kind of charged word for me and usually, half the time anyway, the word that my eye jumps to is not the word that I was subconsciously anticipating, it's just a word that looks like it: My eye jumps to "salve" because I want "slave." And the eye jumps to "perils" because I want "penis." The eye jumps to "stuns" because I want "anus." But it's all subconscious—I wouldn't know the given word had that power for me until my brain, via my eyes, leaped to this second word, that I'd realize, once it happened, I'd only jumped to because it resembled one that subconsciously compelled me.

I've accumulated these sets of words. All they have in common is that they look alike. There's no relationship between "perils" and "penis," except that they look alike. The funny thing is, there's a classic thing in poetry, it's like something surrealism is kind of based on, is that you put two arbitrary objects together, a connection's going to be created between them. Somehow when you put these two words together, even though all they have in common is that they look alike, nothing to do with their dictionary meanings, you assume that they have another relationship. Like, "lavatory" and "love story"—immediately it all makes sense.

So I'd been keeping this list and I wanted to find some way of exploiting it into work. I'd experimented with means over the years and I'd never really been able to find a way of using them that popped and worked for me. But when Christopher and I became friends, and of course, he was famous for the paintings he made using words, I thought maybe that would be a good thing for us to try collaborating on, and he can solve the problem for me. My impulse was to superimpose the words on each other, and that's where we began, in Photoshop. We worked for a year, meeting every week, working at a computer in his studio finding ways of making visual images using the two words from this set of them that I had. It was only like 14 instances, 14 word pairs, but we came up with 50 or 60 images.

We both benefited from it in other ways. I mean, I love this book, I'm really happy with how the book came out and it was a genuine collaboration. We really worked hard together. It wasn't like, I'm giving Christopher the words for him to turn into Christopher Wool pieces. We sat there experimenting and a great thing was that I could totally rely on his immaculate eye that he could see what was interesting, where I was less secure about that.

Then, once we'd done that, in 2008, he started doing word paintings again. He hadn't done any of them for 10 years. He'd moved on into whole other different imagery. But after we did this, he started doing them again, and doing the sorts of things that we were doing, where it was all using existing fonts, like Times Roman, in Photoshop, and not the homemade stencils he'd been using in his famous hand painted word pieces. That comes from us working together. I've been really influenced as well, by what I've learned from Christopher, working with him, from doing those collaborations. One thing I'm doing now is experimenting with word imagery using a personally designed font, and the experiments would be different if I hadn't had the experience with Christopher.

I've done three full books' worth of collaborations with three different people. The other one was poems with David Shapiro. He's a marvelous poet who was one of the poets I first was enlightened by—the so-called "Second Generation New York School"—when I was in my teens. He was co-editor with Ron Padgett of the landmark "Anthology of New York Poets" in 1970. I got acquainted with him when we both read at a festival in the early 2000s. Our book Rabbit Duck came out in 2005. As I said, I like these three books as much as anything I've done by myself. The books as material objects are really meaningful to me, too. It's like you're creating these little separate universes, because it's not you, it's not the other person you're working with, it's this sort of incongruous bubble in reality.

I've done stray poems here and there, too. Me and Cookie Mueller wrote a bunch of poems together and that was really fun. It was casual and random. We'd just be hanging out and it'd get late at night and we'd say let's try handing the typewriter back and forth. It wasn't anything systematic, it added up to probably only four or five of them.

Bands are collaborations, too, like movies and filmmaking, but different bands have different levels of

collaboration. Most certainly, if you're talking about recordings, there are plenty of artists that exert a whole lot of control in the studio, with what the musicians are doing. But a lot of the appeal, making music, is that you're in a real-time state, where everybody is responding to everybody else. There's something uncanny about it, because everybody can be responding to each other while they're also playing what they feel like, and then the whole thing becomes this single piece, one sound mutating. Being in a band is, by definition, collaborative to some important degree.

I do a lot at once. Ideally, if I'm working on something that's large scale, I've got to get up and work on it for a certain amount of time every day, but also I'm a restless person who likes to be doing a lot of things at once. Sometimes, you start wondering, "Okay, am I just avoiding doing the important thing?" And there's a danger of that, but at the same time I know, I'm old enough now, I see my history and I know that that's just my mode. I accept it. It might mean that it's five or six years between full-scale books, but I will have done five other things as well that are smaller scale, and I'm good with that.

People have a hard time accepting collaborations and they're thought of as degraded work, and it's true a lot of them aren't successful. A lot of them are forced. Like those Basquiat/Warhols. They don't really work, to me. Those kind of star collaborations, where people are just fooling around, giving it a shot, without much real investment. I don't really know how Basquiat and Warhol operated together, but it was really Warhol just being Warhol and Basquiat being Basquiat, separately, and then laying their work on top of each other, or alongside, on a canvas. It didn't amount to much. For me, when I'm collaborating, it's not like that. It's like, you're trying to make the work; it's not about trying to be yourself in the work. It's the opposite. What's interesting about collaboration is that you're trying to see what happens when you and the other person subordinate yourself to the work.

At the end of a collaboration, I'm never completely sure who did what. I shouldn't say never completely sure, but I'll recognize maybe a third of the given poem or work as mine. These are usually 50/50—I'll write a line or two, and the other person write a line or two. Usually, looking back, I can pick out a third of anything of mine and guess pretty well third of it is theirs and then there's a third that I'm not sure of at all... and I might be wrong about the thirds that I think I have right. It gets lost. It'll be random lines that I know for sure I wrote, or recognize that the other person wrote.

That's something valuable about collaboration, too: You modify the way each other works. You're trying to write something that holds up as a fully achieved piece, and you tend to follow each other's leads in the way the writing is done, so the lines will conform to each other in a natural way.

I've had a few failed collaborations. I can only think of one that I dropped out of because I didn't think it was working—we just conceived the process too differently, or our mentalities or aesthetics didn't mix well enough.

Also, in 1977 or '78, Patti Smith asked me to collaborate on a book of poems with her. She knew *Wanna Go Out?* and she liked my writing and we were friends. I thought, "Great." We wrote two or three poems together—they've been published—but I called it off. It was when she had a lot of downtime because she'd broken her neck. She had the neck brace on, and so she invited me to come over. She was living on Fifth Avenue, and I'd go over there a day or two a week and we'd write poems together. I liked how it was going, but she made me nervous.

She's very on. I was a big admirer at that point. Actually, when I was doing a series for Dot [a press Hell started in 1973], before either of us had a proper band, one of them was a book by Patti. I did one by Andrew Wyllie. It was just when I was moving into music, I had a whole set of books planned, like five books that I actually had all the manuscripts fully ready to go to press, but I got too involved with music and I only published the two. That was the Wyllie and Theresa Stern's *Wanna Go Out*. The other three were a book each by Tom and Patti (before they'd met) and me.

But yeah, it just felt too tense to me. It wasn't loose and relaxed and natural enough. It's too bad because it could have been a nice book.

Five Collaborative Works of Art

Bean Spasms (Kulchur Press, New York, 1967) by Ted Berrigan and Ron Padgett, with illustrations and drawings by Joe Brainard. Maybe the greatest fully collaborative work of art ever, comprising a book of poems by Berrigan and Padgett, most of which individual poems are collaborations, though some are by the poets separately, and the entirety of which is their mutual brainchild: the poem book as collaboration. (The original is long out of print and quite pricey, but Granary Books did a nice facsimile edition recently.)

A Nest of Ninnies (E. P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1969) by John Ashbery and James Schuyler. This is a straightforward novel by the two poets, the only difficult thing about which is the seeming banality of its narrative (largely conversation among a group of mild middle class suburbanites), but which, as you read, becomes more and more fascinating, witty, and modestly brilliant.

"Sonnet of the Asshole" (Paris: 1871 or '72, originally published in the Zutiques Album of 1872) by Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. An erotic ode to the female anus, the sonnet's two initiating quatrains being by Verlaine and remaining two tercets by Rimbaud.

Cubism (eruption 1907-c. 1914) by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. The creation and development of what is indisputably the most significant movement in 20th century painting was a pure collaboration. The two painters compared themselves to the Wright brothers inventing the airplane and to two mountaineers roped together on a shared climb. For a period they ceased signing their Cubist pictures, partly in acknowledgement of their collaborative essence. Neither considered a given painting finished until both agreed it was. The two of them didn't apply paint to any one canvas, but they originated Cubism together and continued to collaborate in its development for the near-decade of its sustained flowering.

Lyrical Ballads (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. This book of poems, the first statement of the Romantic movement, was a collaboration, though the poems were written by the two poets separately (in constant consultation with each other). The two conceived together the aesthetic direction of the book, which was a rejection of the elaborate language of their time's conventional poetry in favor of the language spoken by everyday people, and they conceived also its symmetrical pair of subjects, which were to be on one hand "the supernatural" by the examination of the emotions triggered by such phenomena when one believes them real (Coleridge handled this area and one result is his immortal "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), and on the other hand ordinary events of plain real life, village life, seen as novel—as if supernatural—by the poet (this area was covered by Wordsworth in the book, for example in such famous poems as "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey").

—Richard Hell

Name

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Vocation

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