

The Beauty of Collaboration

Some reflections on given opportunities and followed tendencies.

The following considerations are on the occasion of a summit held at the Banff New Media Institute at the Banff Center in Banff, Alberta over a long weekend in May 2003. The summit, entitled **The Beauty of Collaboration**, brought together people from such seemingly diverse areas as sociology, social science, computer science, human computer interface design/research, computer game design, various artistic practices including music, movement and graphic arts/design, distance education, biology, physics and various types of engineering, in order to pool comparisons and contrastive findings towards a collective comprehension of the matter. The summit, thus, considered the viability of sharing research and development – as well as conjecture – in the name of progressive collaboration(s) on site. The summit, then, was structured to be an occasion of its own interest.

These considerations are not meant to be taken as a recapitulation or as a condensation of this summit, but rather as an adjunctive contribution to it; taking what is determined to have been prevalent, consistent and pertinent (if only by way of a certain persistence and tendency to reoccur as the start or the heart of discussions) and readdressing them in the spirit of representation on the one hand, but in the interest of further analysis on the other hand. This contribution, then, to these considerations is not so much itself collaborative (although it may be) as acting upon the occasion of such a collaboration, and taking that opportunity to reflect a little more on the issues and interests after the fact.

FIRST SET OF CONSIDERATIONS:

What is the relationship between collaboration and attraction/interest?

Given the opportunity, do people tend to collaborate? How do they manage their respective differences?

What, then, is an opportunity, such that it garners, creates, and/or invites a tendency to collaborate? If the tendency is a response to an opportunity, then what is it seizing upon? What could underscore a resistance to this opportunity? Could we imagine a principled resistance to this opportunity that would still be consistent with, or exemplary of, an orientation to collaboration itself? Is there a way to even say “collaboration itself”, without inaugurating certain epistemological structures and ideas that could be inconsistent with one’s individual orientation to the prospect and potential (the intent) of collaboration?

If we do assume that social formations are inclined towards some prospect and notion of working together, can we also assume that such formations are likewise inclined to be circumspect about the structure(s) and value(s) of that working relationship?

Imagine a working relationship defined as collaborative wherein the partners have quite different conceptions of the parameters of that collaboration – of the aims and goals that the relationship suggests to them, given their specific orientation. Think

about the effects such a tacit agreement, with such an undefined nature, could produce. These effects could be ruinous – but they could also be auspicious.

A working relationship may be predicated on a shared and understood conception or principle, and yet for all that, still exhibit a profound difference in the exhibited workings of that relationship. The principle may be shared and the practice contentious. What, then, is this tendency, and what is its interest? What does (or is) it(s) promise, or hope, to introduce?

But it's not as if that question could be anything but itself an opportunity, and any reply to it, likewise, contingent upon a similar set of circumstances, and subject to a similar semi-contractual offer and arrangement, the particulars of which are (yet) to be determined. Indeed, the failure or success of the relationship could be articulated on the basis of whether such criteria as favors or frowns upon determination (a progressive analysis) as an active part of the relationship.

So to start with, what might be taken to be interesting – given a desire for, or commitment to, collaboration (as either determined or as [yet] to be determined), is the very idea of the given itself – which is to say, the conditions or appearance of any such opportunity. Simply put, what is this opportunity specifically, who offers it, and how is it presented? And further, what is the proprietary relation (if any) to this offer? What is the nature of the governance of this opportunity? What predicates it? And etc.

The givens and tendencies, then, are not transparent, and, as such, they are, themselves, representative of other opportunities and other tendencies.

The dynamics of the working(s of the) relationship (i.e. the collaboration and its management) are quite different depending upon the place(ment) of power relations. Making the assumption that power is present, and its representatives oriented to an interest in describing and situating its structure and relations in concert with the opportunity given, proffers opportunities and invitations to social relations subject (perhaps) to both tacit and contractual (legal/social) expectations and arrangements.

Sometimes an erasure of power relations is performed before they can be decided upon as either imposing or enabling, in an effort to make the partnership appear as a serendipitous occasion. And upon discovery, they can be merely announced as an invitation to entertain presumed shared interests. (Could this then be articulated as an interest in/of marketing? – What is/are the mechanics of marketing in the service of “suggested” or “offered” – what might be called “serviced” – collaborations?)

Power relations in themselves need not be imposing – reporting structures can be considered good, necessary, and enabling as much as they can be considered bad, gratuitous, and controlling.

The opportunity, then, can be given as a gift is given, and be subject to the same joy and misgiving, expectation and suspicion, and the same ambivalent fortune, precisely because a gift *is* given – because any gift is part of an exchange system (what is given is measured in relationship to what is received). How then, will this opportunity

be given? And how will it be received? And what is this tendency that this given opportunity predicates?

Any collaboration is an opportunity to work cooperatively with others in their interest, but also to betray them (by working with an enemy [personal or abstract]). And any tendency towards this opportunity is itself duplicitous: on the one hand it is seduced by it (a state of interest that is not, itself, without its own complex nexus of desires and intentions); and, on the other hand, it seeks to manage or supervise the relationship. In other words, its movement is both towards and within the relationship. The one who invites such an opportunity (or who, given the opportunity, tends towards it) opens the door, thus, to complex power relations, the differences of which can be felt coming and/or rising from either party and as a consequence of their relationship. The seducer (inviter) [then] is as at much at risk as the seduced (invitee).

SECOND SET OF CONSIDERATIONS:

What is the relationship between design and collaboration?

Can we design "architectures of trust"? Can machines and software be designed towards an intelligence of collaboration? What kinds of systems and tools can we design to facilitate collaboration? What is human computer interface design? Can we build participatory cultures?

Consider trust in the context of an architectural interest and investment (i.e. as part of a building project which encompasses both designers and builders – as well as the thing that is built itself). That is, in the context of a research and development enterprise that uses trust as a device meant to spur a continuative translation of ideas (the abstract) into practical orders and solutions (the concrete). This would be a sort of modernist horizon: one which is ever present as a goal impossible to reach but which by virtue of its place(ment) ensures the development and implementation of programmatic research.

Trust, then, as an active lure, an agent-recruiter whose alliance is programmatically double: it serves to secure both the attraction of a relationship/partnership as well as the apparatus/technology that mediates this relationship/partnership. Or, trust as seduction itself, encompassing not just the act, but its constituency (constituents) as well.

But trust can also be a property value (a commodity). Which is to say that it can be owned and prized by potential customers, who are, thereby, set upon by interested buyers and investors. Abstraction of trust as a value allows it to be placed outside of individual ownership and then auctioned off competitively as an open market commodity. Peculiar and idiosyncratic interests and inclinations are treated as inhibiting differences and negotiated into an equivalence or social agreement by way of contractual enticements towards mutual securities or dividends.

So, if trust is seduction itself, and yet at the same time a commodity, then the relationship it serves as a lure towards is likewise commoditized. Which is to say that

despite the lure towards, and attraction of, the partnership it proffers, this partnership, itself, is another horizon towards which its participants walk without hope or regard for (or even interest in) ever reaching – and this is not necessarily (taken to be) a disability or handicap. That is to say, the parameters, protocols and other specifics of the relationship are that which are (always? – yet?) to be determined; they must be negotiated, as it were, and not taken for granted (ideally?).

If deception is the pivot around which considerations of a species of cost-benefit-analysis would turn, (i.e. cost equals misappropriation or iniquity, and benefit equals trust), then security (the guarantee, as it were) could be represented as, or by way of, a system of surveillance, or by checking mechanisms. And the management of this security system must, itself, be convincingly non-partisan in order to assuage concerns. Architectures of trust are thus subject(ed) to scrutiny regarding behavior scruples, and the “partnership” (so to speak) gets bigger.

One might wonder whether trust in an institutional context could ever be anything but that which is involved in a form of structural design that is (already) caught up in an ironic (or cynical) orientation to the “object” of their (i.e. the institution’s) interests, and to whatever misgivings such “objects” may have. Could trust in this context be anything other than that which is always imagined inside or outside of designs (or as that which has designs upon it)? And insofar as it is caught up within the nexus of a communication model that is always potentially haunted by a specter of failed reciprocity, trust must be the prize worth risking a sacrifice of fixed principles for.

Seduction must, therefore, be posited or understood, in an institutional architecture of trust, as that which *necessarily* unravels or undoes the strictures of propriety in order that partners can collaborate towards a good relationship (whatever that might be). And the institution must (also) be able to register its own risk in this relationship – the nature of the sacrifice taken, and the inherent responsibility it incurs upon them by being (playing the role of) the seducer. It does this by shoring up its aura of responsibility. It risks its reputation (not to be underestimated as a collaborative lure) against its promise to do the right thing (once the relationship is inaugurated).

But what it is also selling is mediation. Which is to say that the larger horizon of interests is set in perspective to the network of relations and the relations of network.

And what is, perhaps, interesting, here, is not so much the old chestnut concerning whether or not machines can harbor or allow for human relations (forcing human network relations into restrictive interactive paradigms and reduced pattern variables), because human relations are always and already that which are object and subject, of and to, a mechanics (machinery, technology), the specifics of which are always (yet) to be determined, (those paradigms and pattern variables are always facing relative cementing and deconstruction in relation to those models, strategies, etc., which face-off within human interaction, according to a measure of their own abstraction and practical viability) – but rather, how the mechanics (engineers, workings, design, etc.) of human relations are applicable to, and manageable within, a social production of technology(ical) culture (as the prospect of making the mechanics more human). And, also, how (it is that) this program or goal is itself a ruse to create specific social formations and networks. This would be a displacement, then, of an

ontological orientation that produces economic effects, and done so in the interest of an economic (and systemic) orientation that produces ontological affects.

Machines and software could only ever be designed *towards* an intelligence of collaboration. And it is this *movement* that is really the point, given any investment or interest in collaborative intelligence as that which is to be sorted out by groups. Designing is a gesture, the meaning and effect of which, is (yet) to be determined by who so ever takes an interest in either its offer or the gesture itself, or both.

There is not yet a consideration here of auto-collaboration, or what that might look like, but it doesn't hardly matter, either. In a sense, the machine, or software, on its own is in an auto-collaboration circuit (as could also be said of any instance of analysis or deliberation – such as this one). The design or model is, likewise, the occasion, or trace of (a) collaboration. And any collaboration, insofar as it addresses, in some sense, a problem and its solution, or the means towards a solution, (a procedure, or method, or discipline – all of which are themselves a species of solution), is intelligent. And anything that could be said to be intelligent is subject also to (the prospect of) becoming smarter (or dumber, for that matter).

THIRD SET OF CONSIDERATIONS:

What is the relationship between collaboration and beauty?

Can consensus bring about beauty? Is aesthetics and beauty the same thing?

If design is a matter of artifice, then it is also wrapped up in considerations of the differences between art and craft and all the attendant issues with respect to creative disposition; not just politically (i.e. with respect to motive and use value) but also philosophically (i.e. with respect to orientation and understanding). And if there is any difference between art and craft which registers in any respect as relevant to issues of collaboration, then it is likely to be in beauty's signature that such a difference tries to make itself apparent.

Beauty also is measured, cited, sighted and signed contentiously, both formally and conceptually. The beauty of collaboration, then, will itself be that which is (yet) to be determined (negotiated, instituted).

Think for a moment about beauty, in the context of collaboration, as a consideration, an interest, a gesture, a moment and a pursuit, which has *escape* as part of its motive or interest. Beauty, then, not just as an object (or subject), but also as a horizon or as an agent, which the movement towards or the deployment of, thereby, opens (a door to) or generates (the condition of) an escape. Or, even, beauty as escape, itself. The beauty of collaboration, then, could be thought of as an orientation to collaboration as that which promises escape (i.e., as a moment of it and/or a movement towards it).

Escape here could be understood as flight (i.e. as an exit and/or an entry) and as freedom (i.e. as a condition and/or an action): a kind of break(ing) out into a (alternate) state or condition which can reside in the movement or gesture itself, or which can be on the other side of that movement or gesture (or both). We could say,

then, that the attractive thing about collaboration can be its opportunity to provide (such an) escape. That is, collaboration could be the attractive or seductive invitation, promise, or opportunity to fly, break out, get into, etc. alter(ed)nate states. These states could, of course, be at any time, registered and resonating as individual and/or social and/or environmental (with all the possible fold-backs into these delineations) conditions, which can further formulate themselves as being (*ontos*) and/or place (*eco*) (with, again, the possible fold-backs).

Beauty and aesthetics, of course, is no more the same thing than is sex and sexuality. They have, in a manner of speaking, corporate (communal) ties to one another, which makes the one an industry for the other. But, in each case, the object of that industry is always in a state of flight, and is always (yet) to be defined, invested (in), managed and rendered economically. The one makes industry of the other, but as a result of that industrialization, it also puts in place the opportunity for there to be bankrupted investments, evacuated meaning, exhausted management and destabilized economies.

The aesthetics of collaboration, then, would not look the same as the beauty of collaboration. An aesthetics of collaboration could be a moment when the spirit of (the effects and affective disposition resulting from) the beauty of collaboration (that flight which a certain collaboration has become precipitous, or the occasion, of) becomes available as (is rendered or produced as) a model (paradigmatic and programmatic mapping of the effects of social relations in the interest of reproduction) of collaboration. This is itself always (yet) to be determined as exceptional or even successful.

FOURTH SET OF CONSIDERATIONS:

What is the relationship between collaboration and networks?

How does online differ from parallel physical community? Networked computers are far smarter than individual computers. What is a computer-supported community? How does cooperation differ with mobile platforms?

"Life is a network."

"The internet is a scale-free network."

Frank T. Vertosick, *The Genius Within: Discovering the intelligence of every living thing*.

A person's personal experience of themselves as both an individual within society and as a society within themselves can make them available or accommodating to social stratifications which delineate on the basis of small and large, abstract and concrete, personal and institutional. The network, in this respect, already exists in a prescribed model of social reflexivity. Do the physical properties of a network differ in any significant way from its social properties? Does the physical condition of a network restrict or predominantly determine the character of interaction within it?

Consider collaboration as an emergent property of groups, and groups as an emergent property of a tendency to network. It may be that given the tendency, people are inclined to network, but not necessarily collaborate. It is not necessary to collaborate, at least not in the sense of cooperate, in order for a network to "work", so to speak. In fact, a network functions more "efficiently" if all of its connections are not at equal strength (not exhibiting the same rate of social/interactive success). This tension in the dynamic *weight* of the system allows for it to learn and become, hence, *smarter*.

Collaboration, then, could be considered as an evolutionary product of a network. And there can be an ideal version of both collaboration and the network that obfuscates the importance of failure. Two heads are better than one, but the telephone game reminds us that communication becomes less precise when many heads are participating. However, the end result is also possibly, for all its being a distortion of the original message, more interesting, inspiring, and perhaps even poetic. If nothing else, the resonant feeling of difference inspires awe. Perhaps it is reflective of an experiment in recombinant social genetics, the trans-mutative results of which signify the escape of language itself (from our attempts to contain and master it).

It may be important, thus, to displace any set notion of the aim and parameters of collaboration (as such) as naturally benign, and allow it to mutate and evolve within a social system. In a nexus of collaborative relations, a failed collaboration may be, on the one hand, relative (as in: one person's, or group's, failure may be another's success), and, on the other hand, serendipitous (the proverbial "blessing in disguise").

Any structural specificity with respect to any network is itself mutable (and recombinant), given social interactivity and the potential to delimit the "permissions" of the system administration. This is equally true of both the "hard" and "soft" or "dry" and "wet" wares that serve as the media of communications.

The condition of a system's ("hard," "dry," etc.) mobility, for instance, is not restricted by the physicality of the media. Whether or not the mechanical device may be moved does not inhibit the potential for the form of communication itself to be moved (and vice versa). The notion of mobility itself, thus, can be at work within any active construction and/or functioning collaboration (network). Which is to say that the notion itself (the idea, the concept, the orientation, etc.) and its mutability and elasticity are exemplary of mobility already. It is not so much the unit of communication's mobility, then, that constitutes the mobility of the community, network, and collaborative group, so much as it is an interactive consequence of the relationship (an unintentional conspiracy) between the unit and these communities', networks', and groups' – collaborative or not – mobility (you might just call them the mobilites).

Collaboration, then, remains that which is to be determined, but without any guarantee of what the particulars may be or how in the end collaboration could have been said to have happened. It may be that it emerges despite or in spite of whatever machinations are deployed in order to produce or manage it. And it may appear (to be) quite different/ly than intended, and yet, for all of that still be "beautiful." The beauty of collaboration then, finally, may be, like the telephone game, that moment when we look with either awe or consternation (or both) at the residual effects of an escape from the attempts to specify, produce and manage social interaction. But could it appear so beautiful without those attempts?