

Jan Verwoert

and some members of

it is part of an ensemble

There were questions during the installation of the show and composition of the play: Would you eat your mother after she died? How to kill expectations? If we learn to kill, do we learn to live, if we learn to die, do we learn to live? It started with a conversation in a barn near where Van Gogh was born, in a place crowded with industrial farms, we were discussing the ethical consequences of eating meat, and when the conversation got more and more abstract, we got to the point where the question of how eating your own mother may or may not be different from eating the plants and creatures around you. A lot of us are vegan and made this ethical commitment. Still Gala and Dali made the commitment to eat each other after they died as a beautiful act. Why relearn how to live? In the process of making compost, we took the worms out for a performance, knowing they would die if we didn't put them back. You purchase the worms to make the compost happen. In a quotation by Adrienne Rich she talks about what we may mean when we say "we". Merlin Sheldrake refers to lichens as symbiotic organisms. Are we talking about cyclical concepts of life? Or post-anthropocentric ideas of life that continue when humanity has disappeared? Asking from a vegan point of view: what about the capacity to kill? Is it not a secret weapon? What if expectations are to be killed first? Collective work refers to notions of "organic" coexistence and collaboration. For an organism to live the organs need to get along. Humans are animals trying to be God. On an ecological level, and mass production of meat, industrial killing is happening continuously, and being justified by the demand for feeding the population. So are we asking how to live with the realisation that whatever you do you don't come out clean? In an improvisation the questions arose as the floor was filled with blood red sticky sugar puddles, and the performers came up with phrases that invoked the link of death to food, and the readiness to surrender to this connection. In a moment of gift exchange food may be given by a farmer (or other producer of food) in exchange for a favour you do for them. An animal can't be an equal partner in such an exchange, can it?

Are we talking about collective work here? Feeding off of each other's ideas: will we break even because there is a gift exchange, or are we consuming each other, and the best fed walks? But is the process of collaboration not always about allowing for certain of your "darlings" to be killed, you can't hold on to certain ideas, and them being killed, is it not a fertiliser in the process of something new being born. To get ready for collaboration, do you not have to kill something in yourself first? Ego? Why break even? Is this not way too economical a mode of thinking? What's wrong with ego? Are we not getting involved in each others' egos as we get involved in each other's stories? Why would there need to be an act of violence before there can be fertile grounds? Sacrificial economies are economies too. When ideas emerge in a conversation they are everybody's and nobody's and no one has to be killed in the process. Something resonates and happens without anybody having to give up anything. These are symbiotic ways of living. Enwezor speaks of temporary 'networked collectives'. Beyond the economical tit-for-tat, does the unconditional awaits, but will it consume you, can you walk out alive when you collectively give it your very all? Do you have an exit strategy, or will uneconomical collectives pay for the high with the hangover of losing trust, and hating each other, with the knives in each other's back, for all time to come? Trust can set incredible energies free. In Martial Arts you feed the energy of the opponent back to them. The most difficult word to say is 'no'. But when you learn to respectfully say no you get a chance to walk out alive, and other people need and can learn about and from the reasons you give for saying no. We are talking about people getting burned up within collectives, but what about an art system burning up individuals and putting them on the compost heap? On the market, you are fully at the mercy of an alienating economy of supply and demand. In a collective you can at least decide what you want, need and are willing to give.

Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory, based in Berlin. He is a contributing editor of frieze magazine, his writing has appeared in different journals, anthologies and monographs.

This text came about as a conversation between Jan Verwoert and some members of it is part of an ensemble: Fien de Smet, Kim David Bots, Jochem van Laarhoven, Chrys Amaya Michailidis, Mattias van de Vijver and bas van den hurk on the evening of December 14th 2023 in our temporary studio at Club Solo. The collective put forward questions, made associations, told stories and simultaneously Jan listened to these different voices and ideas and rephrased them into the above text.

What makes working collective attractive is that it gets layered, it gets very dense down there. As a writer I have to give the text up at some point anyhow. So I prefer to do it in a set-up where someone gives me kombucha, and texts get embodied in a way that gives me images that I don't think of when I'm writing. It's the same story but played on a different instrument. I think visually creating backdrops and I know I need the expertise of a writer and actor, as well the sugar and the sculpture, it's a way of searching. For me it's more about losing your expertise. When I'm here I lose the title 'actor', in this collective, I'm unlearning what I learned in school, I feel blessed by hearing about stuff I don't know about.

What about protecting your creativity? And bear the burden of carrying potentiality in your head when collaboration can give you the rush of actualising an idea immediately because at the end of an evening of working together some reality will be achieved (some workable version of the song has been realised). When the drive towards improvement can be infinite, in a collaboration you can arrive at something that can be (preliminarily) finished. There is honesty in the moment. On your own the burden of the promise (of your potential) is much more difficult to carry, in a collective you can carry it together, even and also by resisting the pressure to immediately actualise. You can even take the path of Peter Missotten: when you have a problem, make it worse. Beyond the pale, the genius and silly may be indistinguishable, but therefore divine. Pushing it out there, is that a very masculine logic? When you surrender to the process (rather than protecting your creativity), do you not walk home with loads of inspiration? Working collectively can be scary because you don't control the outcome created by the input of so many people. Masculinist education is all about taking up space, and filling any power vacuum asap. Collective improvisation may involve a practical ethics of holding space open and listening while you play. What about the famous Miles Davis example of having Herbie Hancock's back by repeating his 'mistake', and thereby establishing it as a motif. What about holding open the space without holding back (your energy)? How to move from reserve to release? When the pressure of maintaining the image of being a 'good person' is a pathway to social terror, can there not be a disco ethics of allowing people around you, in a collaboration, to see your diva/worst side, in the heat of the action, and going through that experience together, within the limits/codes of being reasonable respectful a-holes. You have to be aware of it, and say sorry. Getting to know each others' demons in the process may lead to a particular wisdom: a demonology of collaboration, you know your many faces. Acknowledging (your own and other people's) different sides takes courage and weeks of labour (so sometimes you need to sleep in your own bed). Living with what other people say and what you really don't want to hear is one thing, if there's bad energies they hopefully will clear out. As long as there is listening. Listening is the first thing you need to learn to show you care and can grow. Active listening is different from just hearing, it takes a lot of energy. In a musical relation, sending and receiving, playing and listening are one and the same thing: an incredibly heightened state of consciousness. Listening provides trust, attention and focus.