

Dynamic Duos

A growing number of artists make art as collaborators—brainstorming, inspiring, arguing, and asking each other silly questions

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS





Michael Elmgreen (left) and Ingar Dragset remade the Danish and Nordic Pavilions at the 2009 Venice Biennale into the home and exhibition space for a fictional art collector; the traditional Polynesian sculpture was installed in the living room.

FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, THE SELECTION committee for the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale has chosen an artist collaborative, the Puerto Rico-based team of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, whose conceptually based installations blend sculpture, performance, photography, video, and sound. This choice reflects how far the model of collaborative, idea-oriented art making has come, moving from the fringe to be on par with the traditional archetype of the artist as a solitary genius.

"It does in a way legitimize our type of practice as being an equally valid form of producing art," says Allora, 36, who became romantically involved with Calzadilla, 39, when they were students. Working together was a natural outgrowth of their nonstop dialogue. Today they finish each other's sentences and amplify each other's thoughts. Hybrid works such as the one in which a musician emerges through a hole in a piano to play Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* on the keyboard backwards—recently performed in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art—can take years to gestate conceptually. The duo made the connection to Beethoven's anthem while in Istanbul, and later found the piano they wanted in a Munich building with a Nazi history. Without a signature style, their art often seems to have multiple personalities. "The whole process of conversation and seeing things from different points of view is important," says Calzadilla. "I personally like when the parts aren't reconcilable and the different positions get passed into the work." The process isn't always smooth. "Arguments are important too," Allora adds. "We feel it's essential to really convince each other why it is you like something."

Collaboration has taken many guises in modern art. In the 1920s and '30s, the Surrealists playfully tweaked the idea of an individual author via exquisite corpse—a game of sorts allowing a number of artists each to draw part of a figure on paper folded so that none could see the whole until the work was complete. And pairs of artists from Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí to Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat have come together in fruitful temporary partnerships in which individual styles and contributions remained apparent. But

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the '60s and '70s saw a new model emerge, as couples—including Gilbert & George, Ed and Nancy Kienholz, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, all of them romantic as well as artistic partners—started making work together in lifelong partnerships that obscured their individuality. As opposed to larger collectives with a more fluid membership, such as the Guerrilla Girls, these artist teams each have produced a single body of work as shared authors.

Those joint ventures paved the way for the current generation of collaboratives—including straight and gay couples, friends, and siblings. But they often faced resistance, according to Lisa Freiman, curator of contemporary art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the commissioner of the Allora and Calzadilla exhibition for the U.S. Pavilion. She is also writing a book on Oldenburg's work before and during his collaboration with van Bruggen, which began in 1976 and continued until she died in 2009. "Van Bruggen was always criticized for not being an equal partner," says



For their 2006 work *Clamor*, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla researched the design of defensive bunkers and the history of military music, creating a squat structure that issues a din of intermixed war songs from various cultures.

Freiman. She credits that largely to the fact that Oldenburg, like Christo and Kienholz, had a distinct solo career before teaming with his wife. But she also says it was in part because Oldenburg was the one who drew the concept on the piece of paper. "In an era when ideas are the art, why were her ideas any less valuable?" Freiman asks. Like many of their contemporaries, Allora and Calzadilla had no public artistic identities prior to their collaboration, which eliminates some of that baggage. Still, preconceptions and biases linger; it's impossible for two people to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship with equal status on a single application.

In 1995, when Sammy Cucher was invited to represent Venezuela at the Venice Biennale, he had to petition to get Anthony Aziz included as his partner. "Collaboration was very rare when we started," says Cucher, now 52, who met Aziz, 49, in school in 1991,

when they began using digital media to create political satire about censorship. "The idea that we are two gay men, living together, working together—not a lot of models existed.

Gilbert & George were the guys who gave us permission to do what we do." Cucher and Aziz have noticed some reluctance over the years from dealers to work with artist teams because of a perceived risk of instability in the brand. "Collectors also think of the artist as this rare individual who has a particular kind of magic to produce things that are unique," says Cucher.

Aziz, whose heritage is Lebanese, and Cucher, whose family is living in Israel, are now, for the first time, addressing their personal relationship in their work, interweaving it with larger geopolitical complexities in video installations for a 2012 show at the Indianapolis Museum. One piece tracks a typical day at the pair's studio—except that the artists are dressed as clowns. Against a cacophony of music and radio discussions of unrest in the Middle East, the artists wheel their chairs over to each other's computers for discussion, tack photos to the wall, draw arrows between images, build scenes with tiny toy soldiers, and set up a video shoot of themselves dancing and holding hands. "We're performing ourselves in costumes; we're not acting like clowns," says Aziz. "The costumes had to do with a certain madness that's going on there," continues Cucher.

Certainly not all artists have the temperament to share authorship, but some fall into their collaborative roles naturally. As undergraduates, in the late 1980s, Heather Schatz and Eric Chan spontaneously switched chairs in a drawing

class and finished each other's compositions. Since that beginning, they have built an archive of abstract drawings based on their verbal exchanges. These "characters," as they call them, in turn form the building blocks of their multimedia installations done in collaboration with larger communities, including the staff of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, where they will have a show in 2012. "We keep track of our conversations, and that dialogue is actually an artwork in itself," says Chan.

DRAWINGS LIKEWISE BECAME a vehicle for exchanges among members of the Cuban team Los Carpinteros—though none of the artists had previously worked in the medium. "We started doing these drawings, sometimes very elaborate, to communicate with each other and convince your partner of the idea," says Marco Castillo. He was originally a painter, but joined forces in school, in the early 1990s, with Dagoberto Rodríguez and Alexandre Arrechea (no longer part of the collaborative), who were working with carpentry. "We wrote letters to each other on these drawings." These highly conceptual large-scale works on paper, which humorously conflate built spaces and social dynamics, are an important part of their output, and several are included in their show this month at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. "We don't propose that the work has to be humorous, but you can imagine how funny it is to work in a team,"

Sammy Cucher (left) and Anthony Aziz
in *By Aporia, Pure and Simple*, 2010, a
video in which the couple go about
their daily lives dressed as clowns.



says Rodríguez, 41. "It's not only about arguing." Castillo counters, "Really?"

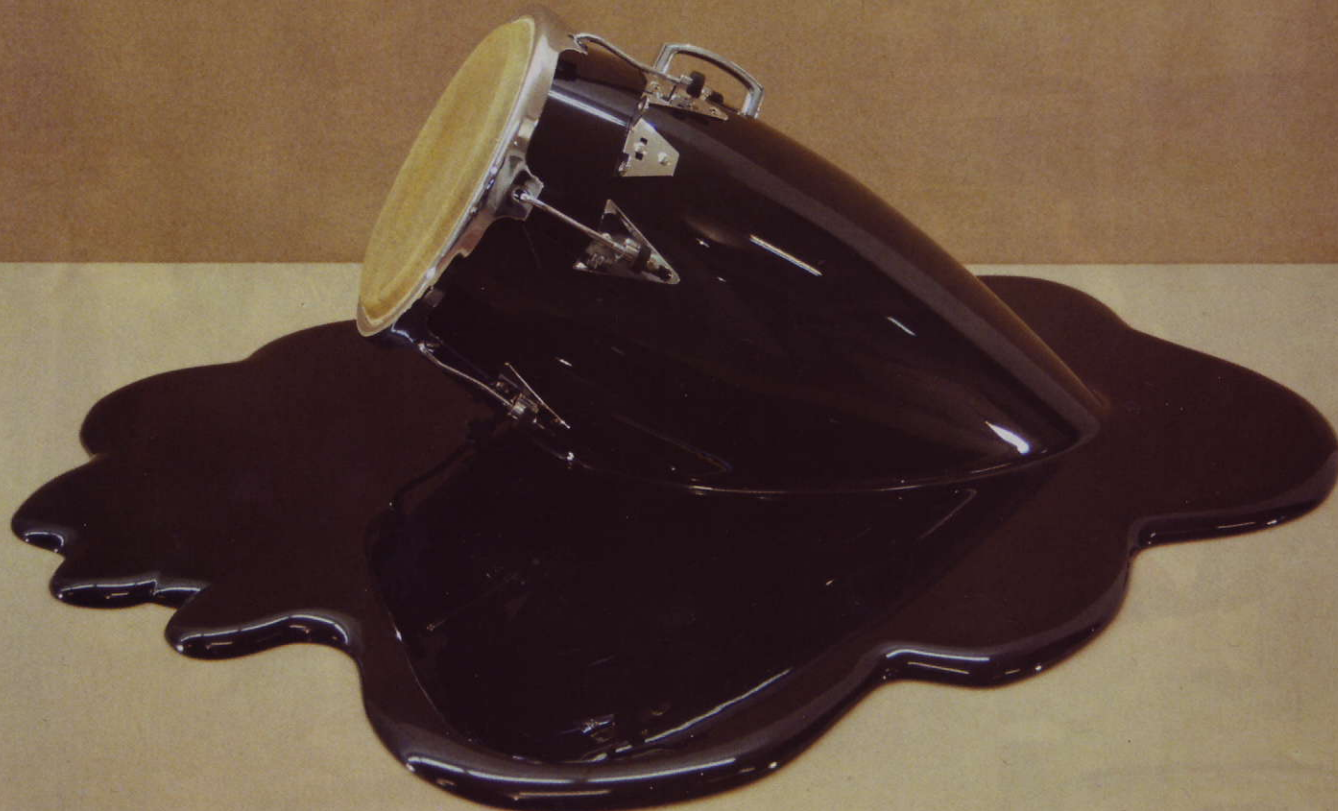
"Humor tends to get dismissed by the art world as something that's not serious or valuable, when it can be quite serious and an important generator of ideas," notes Freiman. "A lot of these collaboratives are tapping into the creative possibilities of play, where there's not so much self-censorship." Indeed, humor and an extroverted orientation seem to be common characteristics of many teams today.

"We never stop wondering why new sociocultural phenomena are happening, and our projects derive from asking silly questions," according to Michael Elmgreen, 49, and Ingar Dragset, 42, a Berlin-based Scandinavian duo who

teamed up in 1994, and who replied to interview questions in one voice. Their theatrical multimedia pieces—including their send-up of pretentious art collectors at the 2009 Venice Biennale, which featured a staged home adorned with coveted artworks and phony real estate agents gossiping about the people who lived there—are products of their extensive ex-

changes of ideas, worries, and enthusiasm. "Working as an artist duo of course limits how narcissistic one can be," they observe. "The outcome will naturally be more communicative since it was already discussed between more parties during the process of realization." Elmgreen & Dragset are currently creating a two-man theater project loosely based on their collaborative experiences, titled *Happy Days in the Art World*, to be

Working as Los Carpinteros, Dagoberto Rodríguez (left) and Marco Castillo make convoluted drawings and fanciful sculptures—such as *Conga Negra* (single), 2010—as a team, never revealing who contributed what to a piece.





performed in Dublin in September and at Performa in New York in November.

Performance was the starting point for the duo known as Type A. Adam Ames, who worked in video, and Andrew Bordwin, originally a photographer, met in the late 1990s through Ames's former wife, the dealer Sara Meltzer, who was exhibiting Bordwin at the time. The artists initially felt competitive with each other over who could be funnier or stronger. Over time they became friendlier, and started collaborating on videos that showed the absurdity and pathos of men competing—whether in a handshake lasting half an hour, a race to scale a wall, or a literal pissing contest. They were constantly back and forth between studios, brainstorming dozens of ideas at a time, some of which wouldn't materialize until years later.

"We were still making work on our own while working together," says Bordwin, 46, who describes his own photographs as being very theory based. "Adam challenged my way of working as being incongruous with who I am. We connected on humor, and the work we do together is an honest outgrowth of how our relationship started and the



Andrew Bordwin (left) and Adam Ames of Type A in one image from their five-part photo series *Spittake (milk)*, 2000. The pair frequently work with the themes of rivalry and masculinity, as in the neon *Target (pink)*, 2010.

meeting places that we discovered." Ames says, "I encouraged Andrew to bring in all his personality, and he challenged me to bring in more rigorous ideas and thought." Both artists gave up their solo practices in 2004 after visitors to their studio were invariably more drawn to their collaborative work. In recent years they have become more involved with large-scale sculptural installation, and their piece *Barrier* (2009) travels to the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut in June. "We keep each other honest," says Ames. "You think about the romantic image of the artist alone in the studio—where're the checks and balances? Who's keeping an eye on his grandiose concepts?"

A BUILT-IN SYSTEM for critique is a common theme in discussions with all these duos. "Every artist debates with themselves, thinks their work through," says Mike Starn. "We each have that internally and then we

externalize it as well," says Doug Starn, completing his brother's thought. "I think it really helps." The 48-year-old identical twins, known for their monumental composite photographs, and more recently for sculptural work, have



collaborated since they were little kids using poster paints. At 13 they took up photography, trading the camera back and forth. "We don't know who shot what," says Mike. "It doesn't matter." Recently, they worked with a group of rock climbers to build a colossal architectural structure from bamboo poles lashed together with rope on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "The rock climbers were our hands and our bodies that allowed this organism to grow," says Doug. Mike adds, "I wouldn't say they were equal collaborators, but in some way they're more. There's no way to slice it up."

Sharing the credit also means not having to take on full lia-



With a team of rock climbers, twin brothers Mike (left) and Doug Starn built *Big Bambú* on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art through the course of 2010.

Their photographs, such as *BBMet_04.2010_k1151*, 2009–10, fix the constantly evolving work in time.

bility, according to Wade Kavanaugh and Stephen Nguyen. They collaborate on immersive and organic-looking environments made entirely from paper, and have an installation on view at MASS MoCA in western Massachusetts through this month. "We both feel a kind of freedom with this third entity because we're not fully responsible for it," says Nguyen, 34, who met Kavanaugh, 31, in 2004 when he moved into an adjacent studio in Brooklyn, and the two became friends and sounding boards for each other. The next year they pulled off their first large-scale collaborative installation—in just a weekend—at the Map Room in Portland, Maine, arriving with 50 pounds of paper and a couple of staple guns. "We

worked straight, without sleeping, and it was like there was a team of eight of us," says Kavanaugh. "The multiplier effect of our energy was totally infectious, and, in my mind, that's why we've continued to collaborate."

A similar sort of efficiency comes from dividing up the work. Walter Martin, 57, and Paloma Muñoz, 44, who show their installations of snow globes and photographs at PPOW in New York, where they will have an exhibition in April, have worked together for 17 years. Unlike many teams, their areas of expertise are clearly defined. Martin first builds the model with clay and small figures, which both artists then critique and modify. If it's a set for a photograph, Muñoz creates the painted backdrop and adds atmosphere and lighting before taking the picture. "For us, it's a question of economy to some degree—it's very efficient in terms of skills and money and time to be able to pool our

resources," says Martin. "It's about support in an emotional sense, too. It's very easy for an artist to get demoralized. I think there are also a lot of unspoken collaborations. It wasn't always acceptable to collaborate."

Today, as the tools for creating all different kinds of conversations—through cell phones, e-mails, Facebook, blogging—are fostering more collaboration throughout contemporary life, and teamwork is taken as the norm in the

spheres of theater, filmmaking, and television, our notions of artistic authorship are multiplying and becoming more complex. "I really believe we are living in a moment of the spirit of collaboration," says Aziz. "Through the Internet and social networking and platforms that exist, people share information and resources. There's a greater sense that that's how things get done, not from isolation. There's a new model being formed for how artists think about the studio practice." ■

Wade Kavanaugh (left) and Stephen Nguyen build site-specific immersive installations in paper, such as *Striped Canary on the Subterranean Horizón*, 2005, at the Map Room in Portland, Maine.

