

Semiconductor

Ruth Jarman and Joseph Gerhardt telephone interview with Laura Sillars

Could you tell me what you think about the term collaboration?

R. We've been working together for over ten years – and we were partners before then, we didn't decide to work on a project. It just happened.

J. We were working on a few small things

R. Then in 1999 we worked on our first film together and we continued to explore ideas and a natural process evolved across two or three years and then we thought – so is this what we are – that we work together.

J. Our collaboration is a merging of both of us – not two distinct voices coming together.

So, for you it's more a case of a creative compression rather than collaboration?

R. Well, because we're partners we don't have to arrange to meet up. We don't really think about it as collaboration – which sounds quite formal and precise. We have to be open at any moment to discuss each-others ideas, sharing all of the thought process.

OK, but how do you manage boundaries, my partner is also a curator – and a when I get home at the end of a long day I don't always want to hear about his projects!

J. We don't even get to go home – our studio is in our home.

R. In the early years of working together we had to build up a lot of trust with each other, trust in each-others ideas and confidence that those could work out. We were working so much, we made so many works in the first three years because we were constantly exploring and experimenting. Our conversations are now more about where we are taking our work more broadly – where do we want it to go.

So you have no boundaries?

J. We have more areas of focus than we used to. The normal process of our practice is that whoever is most inspired to take the lead on the project will direct and drive it. We have too many ideas and it is these that we have to fight on as to which we are going to take forward.

R. There are different elements to the work that we do – developing an animation is hugely time intensive, so it's not so much that we have to stop working or draw clear boundaries – like we can't talk about that now – but that we structure our time quite differently. Our live performances take us out of our daily routine – they are extremely intense and for three or four days at a festival we can be working

J. Also – within our practice there are so many elements to the development of a piece – we start with a photograph and videos and then add sound – for this we have multiple ideas...

So, there is enough space for you both in your work?

J. Yes, it's not like we're constructivist or conceptual artists where we follow through one idea within a work – there is room for lots of different ideas – this gives the work richness and complexity.

R. We've come to understand the way we work better over the last couple of years though doing lots of residencies. We try and keep our minds open before we get there and try not to have any expectations, this way we arrive and allow the context to set the scene and let the process unfold – it happens organically. We have the confidence that it will, that something will happen – we can arrive empty handed – but the process will open out and the work will emerge.

Does having a shared name enable you to share the creative process? So even if one of you is taking the creative lead you are both contributing to the same thing?

J. Well, yes, the name is useful in some respects Though so many people think we are some big media company of 20 people producing high-end content. And whenever we give talks people always want to know exactly who does what.

R. People are always so fascinated by the division of labour. There is a lot of technical stuff in our work – people always presume that Joe makes all of the technical decisions – and I don't want to go along saying 'I do that too'.....

So there is a gender thing!

R. Yes!

J. We have started to try and identify ourselves more in our work, to identify ourselves individually, to reveal the presence of the artist within the work.

How?

J. Well, we do it through adding our own names after Semiconductor – but also visually within the work.

Do you have individual artistic signatures within the work? If you saw a piece of work that the other had made, would you be able to recognise it as their work?

R. That's difficult – well – no not really – the films that semiconductor have made are the only films that we have made – we only started making this work when we started working together.

J. But you were more into architecture when we first started.

R. And you sound

J. But we were both interested in landscape and that absorbs the other two elements – that they can be held together within the breadth and scale of landscape.

R. And there is the another angle which is the computer – which we also collaborate with – we have a fight for control with the computer, we consider it a character within our work with its own structures. The name Semiconductor comes from the computer – a chip inside the computer that is a processor. Specific software would always try and move in certain ways or was constructed to allow certain decisions and we were always playing around with that – finding the limits and seeing if we could move around them.

Technology has changed a lot in the last ten years, has this affected your work?

J. Well – not really – we don't look at it like that. It's more like a painter or a sculptor use familiar materials to produce something, we use the computer as a tool and we try to move beyond what it offers initially. It is something malleable – but sometimes you run into a dead end and that is interesting too. The software we were using initially was an early character animation programme – we manipulated it for a different function. It provides a framework and we are always provoking it to find out what the potential of this media could be.

When you first started working with new technology you were operating within quite a narrow field. Do you think your collaboration developed in response to a lack of an expanded critical community? That, in a sense it provided a context?

J. Well we didn't think that at the time and we hadn't thought about it until you suggested it, but yes, it's quite insightful – we motivated each other. She was the bridge – maybe there is a better word. By working together we did create the sort of space that a community provides. Having a space to bounce things off each other and to nurture an idea. The structure allowed us to believe in ourselves because we believe in each other. Other artists experience self-doubt and have confidence problems – but that is not something that has troubled us. We test our ideas. The ideas are shared, interrogated.

R. There was an international context and we were connected to that. We travel a lot now – but, here in Brighton, there has been a good music scene but the art scene never really established itself.

Talking about music, you perform live with music and image quite regularly, does the way you work together change in that context?

R. We've been developing our own tool which we use when we perform live. Somehow, this is different because at the moment it requires one brain and two pairs of hands. It looks like we're projecting pre-arranged abstract imagery but we are actually making that live – it is an intense process and requires a lot of practicing at home first. We wanted to challenge the computer – what can you do in real time? What can you actually deliver? We try and push the computer and ourselves.

This is a piece of software that you have developed yourselves?

J. Yes

R. So you have what seems to be a 2D image that opens out into a 3D blank space as a simple line shifts and morphs into a solid object that then rotates, twists and turns – the pre-programmed music triggers certain manipulations to occur within the programme so that gradually the shapes that you are making and the imagery you are feeding in through the live camera feed take on a life of its own. We have exploded this over the last year – it is really exciting to process something out of nothing. Live work is being explored by artists right now – we get invited to perform at VJ events – this is much more complex than Vjing – but even people who are deep in this field think we're using pre-programmed material.

J. We've been working with musicians such as Steve Reich, a pianist, with a piano with microphones linked to the keyboard. So he played a kind of abstract set which connects, interrupts and sends signals through to the computer and to which we try and respond from our side.

R. With the Sonic Inc work, we do have to storyboard it in advance so we're heading in the same direction ... it's immense fun doing something which is just pure aesthetics, form and structure. I suppose it can be quite self-indulgent pushing ourselves as far as we can – we are totally absorbed in the moment. For the audience though, that can be quite alienating, especially as all of the processes used to be contained within the computer – clicking a mouse or pressing a button – but we've externalised some of this through developing a big graphics tablet which has a real analogue feel to it. And as I'm drawing the audience have visual access to the input that is responding and working with the computer. The audience can see where the content is coming from. It's much more intuitive and performative.

I'm interested in all of this – you're almost setting yourselves up to interrupted. On the one hand you practice and get the whole thing to run tightly and on the other you are searching for something more freestyle. It's a bit like the surrealist games where they try and locate their unconscious responses... are you searching for that elusive creative moment in your live work?

J. Yes, well there is something of that – our live work has a different energy from our films, which we work up over a period of time – they are so intense and we are pushing ourselves and our equipment as far as we can.

But it's not just in the live performance arena that you have borrowed from the music world, you have used a music model as opposed to an art model to distribute your work?

R. Yes, you get a much wider set of responses and diverse feedback from people this way. In the early days we created our own club in Brighton – Quadraphonic clubs – where we invited artists to collaborate with musicians. Working with people who we knew were making music or images using new media and who were open minded enough to give it a go. There was a sort of freeform thinking explored here with no pressure and no expectations. In the first DVD they included tracks by local musicians and artists working together. We stopped when we ran out of friends to perform and we would have had to interrupt our own work to apply for funding – but it was an incredible experimental experience. We were aware that there was this arts community over here and another totally separate music community over there – we were trying to form a bridge for those communities – to create a hybrid between music and art.

And here is that word bridge again!

J. Art can't cope if you take away the individual artist. People were shocked when we initially produced a DVD of our work and sold it cheaply or gave it away, they couldn't understand what we were doing. It's not how art works. But for us it is much more interesting to see the work produced in that way – you create a different audience for your work. If the DVD sits on a shelf alongside a Casino Royale DVD, what does that

mean for the work and how it will be viewed? In an art gallery you have a lot of control about how your work will be seen and consumed – we are interested in what happens when you lose an element of that control.

The issue of gender came up earlier in this conversation – in the history of women artists having a baby has traditionally been one of the most significant challenges to sustaining an art practice – do you have a family?

J. No, and yes, I don't know how we would manage that – but we're thinking about it. Being an artist is something you do 24/7 and a baby needs looking after. Maybe we need to not analyse it too much – but historically that has had a huge impact on women artists – but we are aware we're running out of time.

J. Did we meet at FACT at the ITEM conference when we discussed collaboration?
Well I was there – that was quite a strange conversation because everyone was coming from different angles.

J. We seemed to be talking about artists collaborating with curators – I don't think that's collaboration!

Can I use that comment?

R. Oh no, Joe will get himself into trouble again!

No he won't it's interesting – for you, collaboration is defined by specialists cross-fertilising each others' work – curators are more like editors I suppose – it's a different relationship!