

ARTnews

DYNAMIC DUOS: How Artist Teams Work

BY GLENN ZORPETTE

Artists are teaming up in growing numbers. "Our best ideas are born from talking," says Alexander Melamid of his collaboration with Vitaly Komar, "then the spark comes"

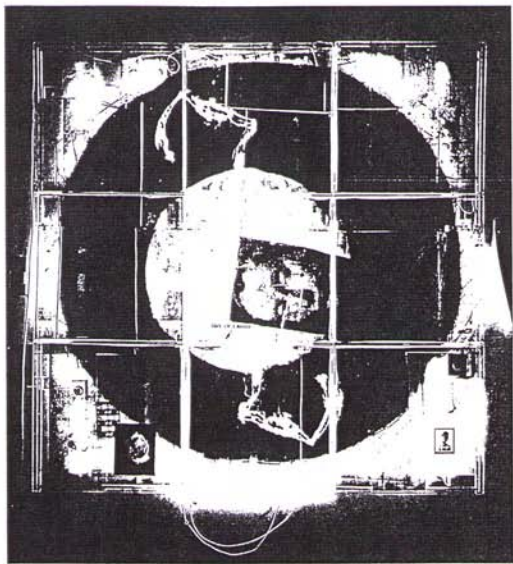
Of all the premises on which modern art is built, one of the most unshakable, surely, is the idea of the artist as rugged individualist, the singular genius working in isolation, the visionary driven by intensely personal perceptions, compulsions, and, perhaps, demons. This image has served the art world well for over a century. Robert Hobbs, an art historian who has written extensively about artistic collaboration, calls it the cult of the individual: "We've inherited these late-19th- and early-20th-century notions of art as individuality. It's a legacy we've held onto because individuality has spelled marketability. But artistic individuality is overrated, it seems to me." And he's not alone.

"Twenty-five years ago, collaboration seemed very odd, very much against the idea of the artist and how art should be done," says Antonio Homem, director of New York's Sonnabend Gallery. "But there have been so many artist teams lately that I think people have stopped seeing it as something peculiar." Sonnabend represents Anne and Patrick Poirier and Bernd and Hilla Becher, two of the most established collaborative couples.

Artistic collaboration was not exactly unheard-of before the current trend. Around 1920, Jean Arp began collaborating with Max Ernst and also Johannes Theodor Baargeld, and later with his wife, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for 25 years. George Grosz and John Heartfield worked together for years on photomontages, which Grosz claimed the two invented "at five o'clock one May morning" in 1916. The Russian avant-garde and Socialist Realism in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s had many teams, including the Stenberg brothers and Kukryniksy (Mikhail Kuprianov, Porfiry Krylov, and Nikolai Sokolov). Most of these artists, though, with the exception of some of the Soviets, had

substantial solo careers as well. What distinguishes the current wave of collaboration is that the majority of the participants seem to have little or no artistic identity outside of the union. Within most of these teams, there is no overweening visionary, egos are kept in check, and demons are mostly unknown.

Collaboration has become enough of a phenomenon to inspire several exhibitions in recent years, including "Artistic Collaboration in the Twentieth Century" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, D.C., in 1984, and a show of some 50 works organized by Independent Curators Inc. of New York called "Team Spirit," which toured seven museums in the United States and Canada from 1990 to '92.



OPPOSITE Collaboration came naturally to Mike and Doug Storn, 33-year-old identical twins. "Genetically speaking, we're the same person," Mike says. "We've been doing this since we were little kids." ABOVE Some Saint's Fingernail, 1990-94, one of their photographic sculptures.

At first glance, a show of collaborative works looks like any other exhibition. After more reflection, however, two themes seem pervasive. One is research-based art, in which, for example, ecological, archeological, or architectural themes are explored, usually through photography, sculpture, installations, or some combination of the three. The other is a preoccupation with politics.

Of the researchers, Helen and Newton Harrison bring unusual credentials. After turning to art, Helen, a sociologist, Glenn Zorpette, a senior associate editor at IEEE Spectrum magazine, writes for a variety of publications.

was offered the vice chancellorship of the University of California's San Diego campus in the late '60s. Helen recalls the prospect as being "a totally different road than I wanted to follow." Meanwhile, her husband, a painter and sculptor, had become convinced that "if I was going to do anything of worth, it had better take up the issue of survival. And I couldn't do it alone. In a sense, Helen became an artist and I became a researcher, in the process of teaching each other to be the other party."

They took up their theme by treating the survival of rivers, native customs and ways of life, and, especially, ecosystems. Their best-known work to date, *The Lagoon Cycle*, was a sprawling, multipart installation that they worked on from the early '70s through the mid-'80s, consisting of photographs, maps, diagrams, and two small artificial ponds, in which the effects of monsoons were simulated and Sri Lankan crabs were induced to mate.

Another husband-and-wife duo known for their research-oriented work is Bernd and Hilla Becher. For 35 years, they have been devotedly chronicling stark, utilitarian industrial structures. In hundreds of mostly black-and-white photographs, they have preserved the work of often unknown architects whose silos, grain elevators, blast furnaces, and water tanks dot the landscapes of Europe and North America.

"This is a nomadic architecture," explains Bernd. "It lasts 50 or 60 or 70 years, and then it goes away."

"It's not like the pyramids, for eternity," adds Hilla. "So we thought it was worth documenting."

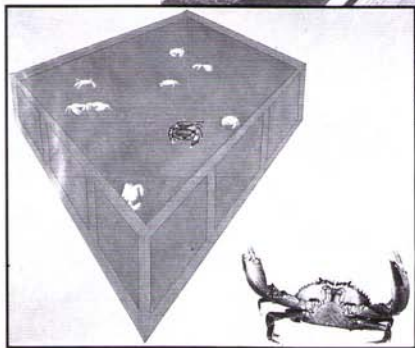
They met as students in the late '50s. He was a painter and a montagist whose interest was in industrial buildings. She was a photographer who shared Bernd's attraction to industrial structures. "There was a fascination, but we both had to work out a way to find a shape for it, to develop an alphabet of the subject," Hilla recalls. What evolved was an almost archival technique based on researching the objects and industry they were documenting. "We figure out a few archetypes in each category and then we try to cover a certain span of variation," she says.

As with the Bechers', the work of Anne and Patrick Poirier has architectural elements and research underpinnings. But the Poiriers' fascination with archeology has led to works with conspicuous dreamlike and fantastical overtones. The couple's highly detailed models of ruins and archeological sites, which can be more than 10 yards on a side, call to mind long-lost civilizations and mythologies. They may be based on real ruins, on the Poiriers' imagination, or they may be inspired by places of powerful significance like Hiroshima or Berlin.

Anne, frequently prompted by Patrick, traces the origins of their partnership and art to travels they took in the '60s. After touring in prewar Cambodia and settling down near Rome, the Poiriers became captivated by both countries' magnificent ruins



STUDIOS BY ASSOCIATES



ABOVE The Harrisons combined Helen's background in sociology with Newton's as an artist. **INSET** A detail from their sprawling installation *The Lagoon Cycle*, executed during the '70s and '80s.

and the fragility of civilizations. Having been inspired together, it did not seem odd to work together. "It came naturally, because Patrick and I had not worked a great deal separately," she explains. They also took their cue from "people in music working together—like in rock and roll. We thought it would be richer to share something."

Today, Anne says, "when we are at a site, we are touched exactly by the same things." During the day, she explains, the two often go their separate ways to examine ruins, take pictures, or make notes. When they meet at night to talk over the day's work, she says, "always, we have had the same impressions—separately, but together."

It is probably a safe bet that any two people who have worked together for a quarter of a century are kindred spirits, but the Poiriers seem to have taken the idea to new heights. The playful duo, who resemble one another and heighten the likeness by dressing similarly, have been known to have a little fun with their reputation. Andrew Ginzel and Kristin Jones, another husband-and-wife team, met the Poiriers in Tuscany some years ago. "They told this story, about how they met in the Louvre," Ginzel recalls. "One of them was sitting on a bench in front of a painting and the other one came over and struck up a conversation, and it turned out they both loved this

painting. Then they discovered after a number of years that they were twins, separated at birth and brought up by different parents. They told it with a straight face."

Asked about the story, Patrick laughs and admits it is a private joke he and his wife play from time to time on people they meet and even on biographers seeking material. He insists the part about meeting in front of a painting in the Louvre—*Et in Arcadia Ego* by Nicolas Poussin—is true.

Few if any of these teams actually set out to be creative partners. Jones and Ginzler, for example, who make large-scale ephemeral installations in public spaces, met in 1981 on the loading dock of the Hürshorn, where they were helping friends prepare for a show. Both had already begun careers as artists, and romantic involvement soon led to an informal sort of collaboration. "We worked, not knowing we were a team, but with the consciousness that together we could produce certain kinds of things we could not produce on our own," Jones says.

Simple enough? Not in the art world of the mid-'80s. Dealers and collectors were nonplussed. "Questions that would never be asked today were asked then," Ginzler says. "Like, 'If I buy this piece, and they stopped working together, whose piece would I have?'" says Jones, with a peal of laughter. "It's almost as if working together is a recognition of the fact that we're mortals and that the identity of the individual who creates a work is not as important as what the work does for you."

"A lot of works held as precious, or revered, were made by people whose egos are long gone," Ginzler adds. "But the work is still as relevant."

The point of collaboration, of course, is to make art of more power and significance than could be achieved otherwise. The fact that it works is hard to dispute. But the way it actually happens is a bit elusive. Although most collaborators execute works together, the real value of collaboration comes in the more conceptual stages of the artistic process: inspiration, criticism, and refinement of ideas. For this, Jones and Ginzler, who are represented by Damon Brandt in New York, speak of the necessity of maintaining balance: the relationship must be comfortable enough that there is a sort of kinship, or at least a reservoir of shared views, while there has to be enough tension to keep the edge sharp.

"You want one and one to add up to two, if not more," explains Ginzler. "The danger is that one and one could add up to one and a half. You don't want too comfortable a situation. There's a capacity, in a collaborative situation, for some tension, which can create an incredibly creative dynamic."

"You're never quite let off the hook," he continues. "You can never regress into your own world, because someone else is listening." He pauses before adding, "Sometimes at night, when we're working late, there's a subtle competitiveness at play. At the same time, there's a..."

"Momentum," Jones supplies.

"It's easier to take certain risks, because you're not 100 percent responsible," says Ginzler. "I can suggest something to Kristin that might be a little crazy, but to which I think there's some validity."

"And I might say, that's absurd, but how about this..." says Jones. "That's why it's impossible to say whose idea a project was. It becomes a fabric of conversation."

This kind of dialogue and built-in criticism is one of collaboration's most important advantages, by all accounts. Mike and Doug Starn, 33-year-old identical twins, have been working to-

gether for almost 20 years. According to Mike, "All artists have internal dialogue. But we get the chance to have external dialogue, too." Represented by Leo Castelli, they specialize in conceptual photography, often with toning and elements of collage.

Collaboration came naturally to the Starns. "Genetically speaking, we're the same person," Mike notes. "We've been doing this since we were little kids."

"We've done work individually, but the best work has always been collaborative," says Doug.

The Starns' collaboration, like the others', works on the balance of kinship and tension—it's just the kinship in this case that is unusual. "Being as close as we are, the ideas are very often understood, even before they have a chance to be spoken," says Mike.

The point-counterpoint tends to intensify as the work progresses. "We always end up taking opposing roles," Mike begins.

"I was about to say, no, not really," Doug says, laughing. "It's not so much a conscious effort to oppose, it just happens."

As far as the actual execution of the works, who does what tends to fall rather consistently along gender lines. Among the



Anne and Patrick Poirier, who are married but like to tell people they are twins that were separated at birth, in front of one of their highly detailed models of ruins and archeological sites.

couple who do research, it is usually the women who can be found in the library poring over archives. And whenever there is a 'velting to be done, it is the male who holds the torch. Take Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, who have been working together for more than 20 years. "I nail, she paints," Edward says.

Like any relationship, a collaboration requires work. "Sometimes you are in a good mood for working, and the other is not," says Anne Poirier. "Sometimes collaboration is very helpful, but sometimes it is heavy. Sometimes you fight like hell." Doug Starn concurs: "Sometimes there's a lot of tension. We try not to work 18-hour days. That's when it gets bad."

Prime examples of the power of opposition are Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, veterans of the Soviet dissident art movement of the '60s who have been extremely successful in the United States. "It's unbelievable luck that we found each other," Melamid says, "because we're very, very different. That's why it works. The work is more exciting because we have different perspectives on a project. Our best ideas are born from talking—then the spark comes." Whose idea was it to poll 1,001 Americans about what they like and don't like in art, and then actually



ABOVE Andrew Ginzler and Kristin Jones make large-scale public works. BELOW Their *Atoll*, 1990, a steel-and-fiberglass installation in a lagoon that is part of the campus of the University of California at Santa Barbara.

produce the most and least favorite paintings? "Ours!" Melamid almost shouts. "It came out of conversations. There are many ideas. Sometimes we can realize them, even crazy ideas.

"I can't think individually," he continues. "I can only think in groups. Maybe it's a part of Russian culture. Writing and publishing were sometimes forbidden, but the culture of conversation was very well developed. When you talked, it was unlikely that someone would arrest you . . . after Stalin, anyway."

Komar and Melamid are the best known of a somewhat disproportionately large number of artist teams from (or residing in) the former Soviet Union, including the Odessan husband-and-wife team of Liudmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko, known as the Peppers; another Odessan couple, Svetlana Martynova and Igor Stepin, who go by the name the Martinchiks; and Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin from Moscow. All of them, including Komar and Melamid, are now represented by Ronald Feldman in New York (he also handles the Harrisons).

These couples are just a small sample—a few of the ones fortunate enough to have found recognition beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. Such a concentration of artist teams, it turns out, has social and political underpinnings beyond a propensity for conversation. According to Melamid, the cult of the individual had no place in the Soviet Union of the '20s. Teamwork was quite typical and continued to

be actively encouraged later among artists working in the officially sanctioned Socialist Realist style. "The idea," says Melamid, "was that artists would become part of the socialist conception of production, that art was no different from other forms of production."

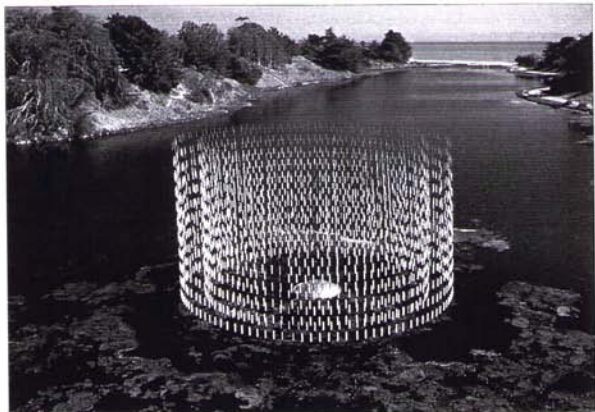
One Soviet team of that time that was unusually gifted was the Stenberg brothers, Georgii and Vladimir, who created sculptures and graphic ephemera, including the memorable poster for Sergei Eisenstein's classic film *Battleship Potemkin*. The two brothers always signed their graphic works "2 Sten 2" or "2 Stenberg 2," and after Georgii was killed in an accident in 1933, Vladimir never again made a sculpture of note.

All of this would seem to have little to do with the famously irreverent Komar and Melamid. But it was partly because "collaboration belonged to official art" that they began working together in the mid-'60s, Melamid says. "We tried to mimic official art, as unofficial artists."

Like most collaborators, they are a bit uncomfortable with analyzing the minutiae of how their partnership works. "When you paint or draw, of course, it's individual," Melamid says. "But painting is more than moving a brush on the canvas." He asserts that "every time you work in collaboration, you create a new individual" who is, in effect, the artist responsible for the collaborative work. Partly to underscore the notion, he says that in the early '70s, while they were still in the Soviet Union, he and Komar actually did "create" two artists, Nikolai Buchumov and A. Zyablov, including their bodies of work, biographies, and various artifacts from their lives.

Buchumov, who worked in the early 20th century, "was a very strange artist, actually," according to Melamid. "He lost his left eye as a young man. He painted four landscapes a year, very small, with his nose visible on the left in every one. He was the ultimate Russian realist." Zyablov, on the other hand, was the 18th-century inventor of abstract art, "a Russian genius."

Teams like Komar and Melamid, in which the partnership is



explicit, may be only the most obvious manifestations of collaboration in art. Antonio Homem says: "I am convinced there are many teams that are unknown because the input of one person is not publicized very much. There are lots of gray areas. It's a funny question. It can become touchy very easily."

In many cases, of course, the unrecognized partner is a male artist's wife or lover. Pinning down who did exactly what, however, can often be difficult or impossible, as contributions may have had creative, emotional, administrative, or logistical components. Women often mentioned as deserving more credit than they typically receive include Christo's wife, Jeanne-Claude; Marisa Merz, whose husband is Mario; and Barbara Heizer, Michael's wife.

A notable exception in this regard are the Kienholzes. Edward Kienholz was already an established artist in the early '70s when he met Nancy, who had had no prior involvement in the art world. Before long, she began playing a role in her husband's work. By 1979, that role had grown to the extent that Edward formally declared her his collaborator, not only on his works then in progress but also on everything they had done since meeting. The nature of the collaboration "just changed over the years, to the point where I began to believe Nancy deserved her name on the work as much as I did," Edward says.

Nancy's part in a number of recent works has been critical. The Kienholzes, who are represented by L.A. Louver Gallery, mention as one example their *Merry-Go-World* or *Begat by Chance and the Wonder Horse Trigger* (1992), a round room divided into eight segments, with lights and music to give the impression of a wheel of fortune. The viewer, in effect, spins the wheel and is thereby, in random fashion, assigned a persona: a barber in India, a wealthy Parisian, a Native American girl. Behind the piece is the idea that one's station in life depends on where, when, and to whom one is born.

The Kienholzes trace the origins of the work, which is on view through September 21 at the Sonje Museum in Seoul, to an experience Nancy had in Mexico while traveling with Edward. "All these kids were begging," she recalls. "I was giving them money. And I noticed this really old woman, wearing a dirty white dress, and she had one hand out to beg and the other was holding a cloth to her mouth. She was coughing blood. I was giving money to the kids, but not to this woman."

Out of this disturbing realization came "the germination of an idea," she explains. For several years, she and Edward discussed the experience and what it meant to them. Out of these discus-



"It's unbelievable luck that we found each other," says Melamed (right) of Komar, "because we're very, very different."

hausted," Nancy adds. "We both saw it at the same time. I looked at him and said, 'No, no, we're not going to do it.'" But later, over steaks and wine at a favorite restaurant, they agreed it was too good to pass up.

The episode is a prime example of what Robert Hobbs sees as the essence of collaboration. "What we're talking about, without collaboration, is art as a monologue," Hobbs says. "Now we're seeing it more as a dialogue, as discourse, conversation. Thinking about art as collaboration allows us to see art and creativity as question and response."

sions, *Merry-Go-World* began to take shape. "I wasn't that thrilled about doing this huge merry-go-round," Edward recalls, but "the work captures you. It just drives you along. I'm very happy with it."

"Most times, it's a mutual interest that gets us started on a piece," Edward explains. The idea for one of their best-known works, *Night Clerk at the Young Hotel* (1983), came from the piece's namesake in Spokane, Washington. The place was being demolished and the Kienholzes were there looking for materials. They came upon the night clerk's booth, recalls Edward: "The counter was not there and the key rack was on the wall, but it was almost a complete piece" (the scowling clerk is a cast modeled on a butcher they knew). "The thing that convinced us was a sign that said, 'The doors will be locked at 5:00.' It was such a hostile, nasty place that we couldn't resist it."



The Kienholzes with their 1992 piece *Merry-Go-World or Begat by Chance and the Wonder Horse Trigger*, born from an experience Nancy had in Mexico.