

ON FRIENDSHIP

Rebecca Boswell

Thinking about what to write for this publication, I put away the idea of friendship and its politics many times. It felt uncritical and indulgent to think about friendship in relation to curatorial practice. I accept that the freedom of being able to work with one's friends is a privilege afforded to few.¹ Yet I had trouble leaving the subject alone; it crept into conversations I was having and leapt out of the pages of books I was reading. When I found that the words of one author who writes on the subject had worked their way across several publications I had been looking at, I gave in. At least through writing, I thought, I might gain better clarity over the way my curatorial interests overlap with the informal, collaborative working relationships of my artist peers.

For those who know the gallery as workplace, I'm sure you'd share my view that, in this environment, a significant proportion of one's professional life is spent socialising. You might be away from work but at another art opening, which means it's hard to get a break. For this reason, I've often wondered about the true value of certain forms of sociality, such as friendship, continually produced in art. The art world's reliance on the artist's ability to promote themselves and their work across its social network means there are relationships that are leveraged in the social art world, at the cost of others.² However, I would argue that friendship continues to survive, not only because of the practical function it serves, but also for the affinity it has with the relational nature of the art experience. Considered as a process rather than simply a connection,³ at a deep level friendship serves an important function in the practice of producing and thinking about art.

In other fields it is still common to create clear boundaries between your work and social life. You might be friends with some of the people you work with, but the distinction is considered important as it involves a decision about how you choose to spend those precious hours outside of employment.⁴ There isn't the same demarcation within the field of contemporary art, where a busy events calendar of exhibition openings and performances means that artists, curators and gallery workers see each other all the time. As a result you hear the words 'networking', 'nepotism' or perhaps 'collaboration' and 'community' often discussed, but not 'friendship'. Why? Perhaps the label is still considered a bit sacrosanct: to be used with care. Or, it's the opposite: friendship is a notion too sentimental to be taken seriously. Or perhaps the word clashes with codes

of behaviour, such as professionalism, that are highly valued (legitimately so) within gallery workplaces. Still, friendship permeates working relationships in the art world. In its various ways, it is responsible for inspiring, galvanising and humanly supporting the processes (sometimes breaking them) by which art is made. Friendships between artists and curators are also deeply influential in creating the networked opportunities necessary for art's display.⁵



Dorota Broda, *part time artist full time friend* (installation detail), Gloria Knight, Auckland, 2013.

In my work life, social relationships are deep drivers for me. Yet one of the pitfalls I found working for art institutions was the expectation that you would invest in new relationships continually. Within a busy exhibition programme you were constantly meeting new people and launching into new projects. It sometimes felt highly unnatural the way that, following a burst of activity and collective effort, those freshly minted working relationships would suddenly drop away, only to be replaced by an entirely new set of relationships and project requirements within the short space of weeks.

At the same time, the opportunity of working with a range of interesting and creative people is a major drawcard for those pursuing careers in art. I recall learning the importance of social relationships at art school, where it was almost taught as a part of the curriculum. Questions such as 'What interests you? What ideas and issues are important to you?' were really only questions that you could start to tackle once you knew who your friends were (and you'd been to some shows). Later, friendships formed the basis of artist-run spaces, the identity of which positioned one's work within a larger network of exhibition practice. The tighter these groups generally, the more focused the outcomes were, and often the more critical. But crucially, members needed to

agree collectively on what ideas and issues were important to them and, without much money, sacrifice hours of free time and labour to make it work. As a result, artist-run spaces were fragile enterprises that could make or break friendships, and were usually sustainable for only so long. However, at the core it was about deciding which people, ideas and work you aligned with. And the only way to do this was by leveraging some of your closest relationships to give visibility to those things to which you and your peers were committed. In the professional context of exhibition making and an ever-expanding field of cultural production, this relative freedom of artists and curators to decide ‘who’ and ‘what’ you’ll work with or towards, *continues* to be a reason why people want to work in the field.⁶

This function of choosing is important in Céline Conderelli’s feminist and Marxist critique of the politics of friendship. Conderelli proposes friendship as a fundamental relation with a book project themed around a phrase written by philosopher Hannah Arendt, who once redefined culture as ‘the company that one chooses to keep in the present as well as the past’.⁷ Through discussions with friends, Conderelli builds a central argument that the ordinary, natural alliances we seek with others over and above the structures of family and work give friendship enormous potential as an emancipatory and empowering activity. To this point, Conderelli and her peers discuss Spinoza’s definition of friendship: the affectionate relationships through which people grow their vital potential or *potentia agendi*.⁸ For Spinoza, friendship’s greatest power lies in the communal development of the intellect.⁹ This is beautifully captured in a description of Hannah Arendt’s relationship with novelist Mary McCarthy—documented in letters they wrote to each other for years—with Conderelli quoting Arendt, who explains, ‘It’s not that we think so much alike, but that we do this thinking-business for and with each other.’¹⁰

Conderelli also argues that the act of spending time with *ideas* (or subjects fictional, distant or no longer living) can enact another kind of friendship that doesn’t depend on mutual exchange or reciprocity.¹¹ That sustained engagement with the work of particular thinkers or artists with whom you may strongly identify, yet have never met, is a form of friendship in that meaningful pursuit of self-development. Her point is that befriending things can be both an emotional and intellectual pursuit, and for me this shares much in common with the relational and intimate nature of the journey of thinking about and making art.

Conderelli’s open definition of friendship captured for me a certain relation I have previously only known instinctively. It’s not about doing whatever you want but doing something you *care* about; and you have to care deeply, or it doesn’t work. Because creative and intellectual freedom in art brings with it responsibility (for critique and rebellion against dominant ideologies and frameworks of meaning), for most working in

this field it's a lot of hard work and sacrifice. Forms of professionalised practice within the art world are generally underpaid, many of those hours not paid for at all. This explains why things start to fail if you find you don't care; because there are many times when we have to rely on what *other* ways we recompensed or supported our work.



Dorota Broda, *part time artist full time friend* (installation detail), Gloria Knight, Auckland, 2013.

I would argue that one of the ways we can keep doing what we are doing is through meaningful social relationships. This is most evident in the way collaboration (an inherently social methodology) is used as a vehicle in art. Collaborations create a social buffer or a reprieve from the impracticalities of practicing as an artist or curator independently, but they have political potential too. Curator Dorothee Richter has described the benefits of horizontal working relationships naming 'shared content-related interests, political articulation, and joint positioning strategies' as the conditions required to shift hierarchical power relationships between curators and artists.¹² She says curators are so used to functioning within the hierarchical structures of the workplace they can learn methods of self-organisation from artists. This is also despite the fact that, as Richter says, many aspects of the work of curators and artists are no longer clearly distinguishable from each other.¹³

At its best (and in many instances when it fails) art has potential to produce those deeper relationships that happen when we are talking and thinking about ideas. When I enter new relationships, the most exciting part is when we are talking not about ourselves, but ideas. Such dialogue is an attempt to draw closer to that idea, and this desire for intimacy is a part of the practice of thinking about art. And vice versa. The practice of having genuine, open-ended conversations about art is equally thrilling for

the way it creates value outside of the focus or importance of the art object with enriched experiences and intellectual stimuli shared among friends. The practice of talking about art creates, then, a kind of surplus value in the way important relationships are forming simultaneously in the sharing of ideas.

When we talk about art we are describing a relation between things and ideas, and so it naturally shares an alignment with how we relate to others. But perhaps if this text can do anything to raise the profile of friendship within art making, it is to show that it is deeply embedded in the desire to make and critique art. This has to be protected, especially within a field where success is linked to one's ability to not just survive, but to leverage new relationships all of the time.

Rebecca Boswell is a writer and curator living in Tāmaki Makaurau. She is interested in practices that explore affect, language and materiality, and the relationship of these to politics of labour and economy. As a curator, some of her projects include: *They say this island changes shape* by Eleanor Cooper (2016) and *Hardboiled city* with Christopher L. G. Hill & Francesco Pedraglio (2015) undertaken while she was programmes manager at The Physics Room; and *Carpet burn* (2014) co-curated with Anya Henis at Papakura Art Gallery. Last year she also commissioned *natural sympathies & weird weather*, an online project published through The Physics Room. Rebecca has a Conjoint Degree of Fine Arts (Postgraduate) and Sociology from the University of Auckland and between 2012 and 2014 she was on the Window curatorial team.

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| 1 | Celine Conderelli, Nick Aikens, Avery F. Gordon, Johan F. Hartle and Polly Staple, <i>The Company She Keeps</i> (London: Book Works, 2014), 19. | 7 | Conderelli, et al., 15. |
| 2 | See Lana Lopesi's article on being both an artist and a mother. Lopesi, ' <u>Young Mums, the Arts Ecology, and "Being Radical"</u> ', <i>Pantograph Punch</i> (19 May 2016). | 8 | Ibid., 16. |
| 3 | Conderelli, et al., 19. | 9 | Ibid., 17. |
| 4 | Ibid., 59. | 10 | Ibid., 15. |
| 5 | See Dan Fox, ' <u>Being Curated</u> ', <i>Frieze</i> (13 April 2013). | 11 | Ibid., 16. |
| 6 | It also explains why social dynamics count for so much in the art world—focused as it is, not on the quality of the work, but on one's ability to communicate and promote it with the right people—and why it then becomes difficult for many practitioners. | 12 | Dorothee Richter, 'Artists and Curators as Authors in Cultures of the Curatorial', in <i>Cultures of the Curatorial</i> , ed. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 245. |
| | | 13 | Ibid. |