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BY KEVIN CONCANNON

Collaboration

The Spirit of the Eighties

Collaboration. It's the art-world buzz word of the eighties. Artists collaborate with each other. They collaborate with architects and landscape architects. Choreographers collaborate with composers and visual artists. Video artists collaborate with composers and dancers. In Boston, the Institute of Contemporary Art collaborates with WGBH television to produce video art. And in Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art *associates* with KUSC-FM to produce its *Territory of Art* radio series.

Within the performing arts, collaboration would seem to have the best-established tradition in the twentieth century. *Parade* (1917), a collaborative legend, combined the talents of the artist Picasso, composer Satie, poet Cocteau, and choreographer Massine for what was billed as ballet in the "New Spirit." Dance continues to draw on the talents and reputations of artists of different disciplines.

***In the Key of West*, a site-specific collaboration by Mary Luft, director-choreographer; Dina Knapp, visuals and costumes; and Bill Seaman, music and video. Produced by Mary Luft & Co., Inc., photo by Alice Terry.**

Today's new spirit would seem to be electronic. Contemporary composers often create works, not for live performance but for electronic media. Many emerging composers get important initial exposure by selling recorded works to choreographers for use in performance, or to video artists, for use as soundtracks for tapes. Video artists, similarly, broaden their exposure by working with choreographers and composers. Zbigniew Rybczynski, known for his music videos of popular bands like Art of Noise, has gone on to more "serious" projects, such as his recent interpretation of Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, which was aired on *Alive From Off Center*.

Collaborations between choreographers and composers have evolved from the commonplace interpretation of music by dancers to works that are conceptually inextricable. Choreographer Susan Foster and composer Ron Kuivila, funded by a Fusion/Fission grant through Hartford's Real Art Ways, created an interdependent dance and score, *Gestuary*, that treated both elements as systems of signs, altered in meaning, by the context in which they occurred. The same physical and musical gestures took on different meanings depending upon their different concurrences. As Artists-in-Residence at Real Art Ways, the Boston video artist Bill Seaman created a musical score and multi-channel video work of choreographer Mary Luft's *In the Key of West*, a site-specific piece that explored the history and culture of Key West, Florida.

To some extent, the current emphasis on collaboration in the performing arts results from the increasing presence and sophistication of media technology. Composers who create work for tape, or other electronic media, such as digital samplers, synthesizers, or computers, find audiences unwilling to sit through a performance that might involve little more than turning on a tape player or operating a series of switches. In some cases, the motives for collaboration are, not so much formally mandated, as culturally. Collaboration also serves the increasingly competitive audience-development needs of artists and presenters. Fans of David Salle flock to see his sets for his wife's (Karole Armitage) dance performance. Followers of Mary Lucier's video work will attend a dance performance by Elizabeth Streb to see the video "set." Sets or costumes by a hot artist can enhance a career for a dancer or a playwright.

Collaboration has also become a major enducement for public commissions involving visual artists. While, not too long ago, an architect might call upon an artist to gloss over shortcomings, with a mural or a sculpture, the current vogue is for artist, architect, and landscape architect to work together from the initiation of a building program. More often than not, these projects prove more frustrating than rewarding for those involved.

Architects have traditionally viewed artists as decorators for their masterpieces. In 1951, Philip Johnson, then curator of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, organized a symposium to address the question of *How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture.* In his introductory remarks, Johnson argued for painting and sculpture as "necessary embellishments of architecture." Following the symposium, questionnaires were sent to young architects around the country. In her dissertation on public sculpture, Harriet Senie cites Jack Hillmer of San Francisco as typical of the respondents: "Neither painting nor sculpture have a very important place in our life today. The best way to integrate sculpture with contemporary architecture is to melt them down and make bronze hardware out of them."

The current move toward design collaboration in public art is an attempt to rectify the longstanding, second-class status accorded artists by architects. The "turd on the plaza" has been replaced by the

French artists Patrick and Anne Poirier at the installation of *Promenade Classique*, their 100-ton sculpture, commissioned by developers Savage/Fogarty Co., Inc., for the TransPotomac Canal Center in Alexandria, Virginia.

plaza, as environmental art, and, the decorative mural has been replaced with a conceptual treatment of the wall itself. MIT's Wiesner Building, for example, features interior and exterior wall surfaces designed by Kenneth Noland. While the philosophical framework has changed, since Johnson's symposium, no better example of art as a "necessary embellishment" could be cited.

While the majority of public art commissions—and collaborations—are funded by government grants, private developers are beginning to pick up on the trend. One of the most successful of these collaborative projects is *Promenade Classique,* at the Trans Potomac Canal Center in Alexandria, Virginia, the first major American commission for Anne and Patrick Poirier. The Poiriers were brought in to the project after construction had begun. Landscape architect Paul Friedberg worked with the Poiriers to place their work within the site, deciding, by mutual agreement, to modify the project so that the sculpture ultimately became not a single piece, but a series of pieces, designed as a promenade. The configuration of the terraces, the waterfall, and a staircase were altered to accommodate the processional arrangement of over-scale fragments of classical statuary, and other elements of the Poirier's conception.

Just as an established and trendy artist can help sell a dancer's ticket, he or she can also distinguish one developer's project from another. Aside from these practical advantages, however, collaborations such as the Friedberg/Poirier promenade, or the Kuivila/Foster performance, can offer all the participants something that they themselves would not otherwise bring to a project and an expanded outlook on their work, which they can bring away from a project. In an ideal collaboration, the public is offered more than two stars from different media, as Salle and Armitage; they're offered a sum greater than its parts. ■

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Dancer Karole Armitage, the Armitage Ballet—*The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler*, 1986, choreography by Karole Armitage, design by David Salle, photo by Colette Masson.