

COLLABORATIONS

Staying Limber

By Macy Chadwick

Keeping your creativity fresh can be difficult. Projects stall, ideas stagnate, techniques deteriorate. Worse yet, deadlines can drive away spontaneity and playfulness. While students at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Macy Chadwick and Lisa Hasegawa collaborated on short, unscripted projects to keep themselves creatively limber. Much like a ballerina's barre stretch or the figurative artist's gesture drawings, their collaborative projects loosen up their brains and fingers. They've developed a method that allows them to work quickly and spontaneously on joint pieces, and in the process try out new techniques and ideas.

In this article, Chadwick relates how they got started, the rules of the game, and how they've continued to collaborate after leaving school and moving to different parts of the country. She also talks about how these collaborative exercises have influenced and affected her other bookwork.

Collaboration is an integral part of much of the book arts. We often work with others both inside and outside the field. This is one in a series of articles on the results of artists working together

Lisa and I began working together in January 2003, while in graduate school (in the MFA program in Book Arts and Printmaking at University of the Arts in Philadelphia). We were very stressed about working on our thesis exhibitions later that spring, so we decided to work together once a week to free up our creative minds and give ourselves a framework in which we could accomplish something in a very short period of time with no concern of an audience.

We were inspired by our colleague, Virginia Batson, who had made "one hour books" while a graduate student at University of the Arts (she had graduated in 2002). She had made books from start to finish within one hour. We decided to try the same score, only working collaboratively. We would set aside an hour and clear our desks. Our work areas were separated by a small partition so we could hear but not see each other. At the start of each session, we each would begin a book (or book object, or pages to a book or...) using the materials we had on hand. The "rules" said we couldn't have any preconceived notions; we were to simply start making something, anything.

When one of us got stuck, the other would say, "don't think, just make." After 15 minutes, we exchanged books, and began working on the other's book, reacting visually to what the other artist had started. We continued to exchange every fifteen minutes until the hour was over. The last person to work on the book would sign and title it.

The element of chance is very present in these works done "blind" with Lisa. While we have learned each other's styles and have melded our aesthetics more and more as we work together, I still have total control over the particular area of the book I am working on in that moment, as does she. Ours is purely a visual dialogue, no questions or negotiations needed. I simply react to what she has created, adding to it in my own visual language, and she does the same to my work. Perhaps this freedom remains because the books are completed under time constraints so neither one of us can be completely married to one outcome or another.

In contrast, while working on a more traditional collaborative edition, each artist has more specific ideas of where the project is going. In other collaborations I've been involved in, the process involves much more of a "what do you think if we put a red shape here?" or "I think we should include text on this page, do you?" These ideas are then molded, shaped, and formed by each other in a verbal and visual dialogue, with changes and decisions made together along the way.

After graduate school, Lisa and I began transforming the one-hour books into a process we could do long-distance. Lisa now lives in Seattle and I live in the Bay Area. We've settled into a routine of one book a month, made up of four half-hour working sessions. Instead of swapping work every 15 minutes by reaching over a partition,

we rely on the US mail.

Our sessions take place over the phone. We wear headsets so our hands are free, and we begin and end work over the course of a half-hour conversation. Setting a time constraint reduces any tendencies as artists to spend extra time or add the books to a to-do list that never gets done.

By the time we get off the phone, the books are packaged up (did I mention that we also decorate the packaging?) and ready to be mailed out. It is a wonderful sense of completion.

While on the phone we chat about the events of the week, art shows we've seen, that sort of thing, while keeping our hands working on the books. There is always a point in the conversation where we are concentrating and all is silent except for the whir of the sewing machine or the scratch of pencil on paper, but then we get back to talking.

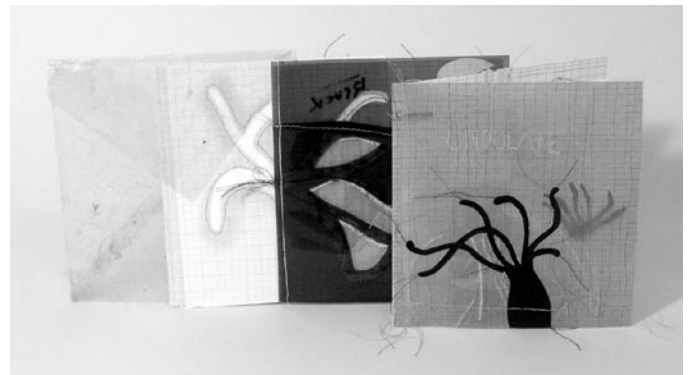
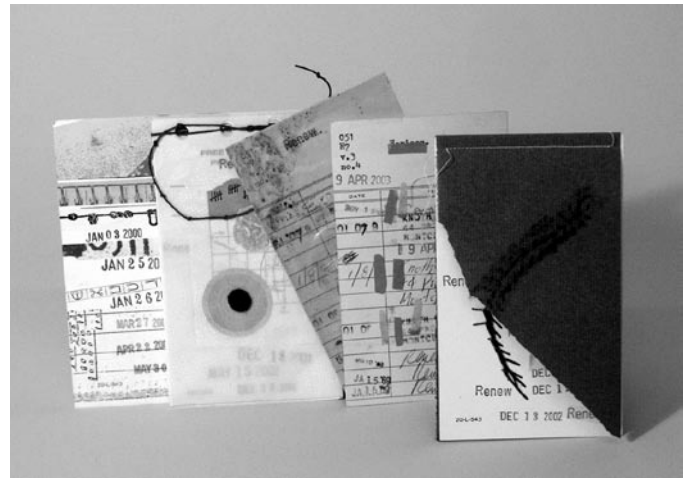
Working from afar does change the immediacy of the project. Having it stretched out over weeks instead of just an hour can change the momentum. By the time I receive the book I started two weeks earlier to add another layer to it, I have completely forgotten my inspiration.

I'm not sure the collaboration would work the same way if we hadn't had time to fine-tune our collaboration skills while working together in person in Philadelphia. As with any creative partnership, we had to learn to work with each other and to really be able to respect the other's work when visually responding to it.

Our process has stayed surprisingly the same, actually, over distance. Once we had changed the time parameters slightly to account for the distance and the mail, we found that we got right back into our routine of working together. The key for us was to work only while on the phone. My advice to anyone wanting to do a long distance collaboration is: have tight deadlines so it doesn't linger too long on the to-do list and know each other's work habits from working together in person.

My collaboration with Lisa keeps me working and, therefore, keeps ideas flowing. Although my own work tends to be more conceptually and formally planned, my work with Lisa is always there in the back of my head reminding me to take chances and enjoy artmaking as an intuitive process. ☺

Macy Chadwick lives in Berkeley, CA where she has a letterpress studio for creating artist's books and prints. She teaches at San Francisco Center for the Book and at The Academy of Art University in San Francisco.



Images (top to bottom) by Macy Chadwick and Lisa Hasegawa
Photos: Macy Chadwick

Renew, 2003, 3" x 5" altered library cards, embroidery floss, collage

Undulate, 2004, 6½" x 6.5" single folios in envelopes, collage, sewing, film

Envelopes from the collaboration, sent US mail, 2003-2005

On back cover: *Reach*, 2004, 4" x 6" closed, mylar, paper, ink