

Phil Treloar / Feeling to Thought

Of Other Narratives

*tracings in the ground of
Collective Autonomy
people–practice–theory–history*

AN INTRODUCTION

Of Other Narratives documents in a seven-CD series, the emergence of *Collective Autonomy* – its development 1976 through to 2003, and the people who made its development possible. This timeframe is not an arbitrary designation. Nor is there some form of systematic procedure implied by it. While seeds were planted well before, and development continues today, 1976 marks a convergence onto the creative field that some years later would be referred to as *Collective Autonomy*, and 2003, the beginning of a significant change in its direction. The twenty-seven years between was witness to, on my part, many unfulfilled attempts, experiments, blind alleys, misdirection, misinterpretation, and plain wrong-headedness. But through all this, somehow, the path ahead always seemed positive, both for myself and for those who engaged. Although inevitably, engagement proved more beneficial for some than for others, I think all who did engage carried away with them something of genuine creative worth. Crucially though, they all contributed. So it is to all these people that I am deeply grateful because without them, and as the term itself implies, *Collective Autonomy* could not have been, at all, let alone become, and continue becoming.

Coextensive with questions pertaining to creative pursuit are those that concern life itself. Experience will always reveal the inextricable connections. Without question, *Collective Autonomy* is a carry-over from my youthful idealism and in relation to it as an ongoing endeavor there have been many people who have given of themselves, provided circumstances, and enabled situations conducive to the work itself. In conjunction with the creative events depicted in *Of Other Narratives*, several of these people will come to light in the program notes accompanying each document in the series. For the present I'd like to mention three whose support and commitment over the years has made the world of difference. Paramount among these is Steve Elphick, with whom I've shared countless hours of music-making, discovery, creative exchange, and wonder-filled friendship. Steve has always been prepared and happy in lending a hand to extra-musical calling. This was as true in 1981 when, for example, he helped build a studio in which endless hours of rehearsal took place, as in 2008 when he offered to help with the nuts-'n-bolts of organizing this reproduction project. Face-to-face with music-making, Steve's creative, hands-on, heart-filled input, has given rise to positive developments in *Collective Autonomy* that always, and without fail, brought to bear a fair-minded, even-handed perspective, especially welcomed at times when I'd lost the plot. A gift beyond value and a true friend, both personally and of creative music.

As will become clear to those interested enough to follow in its entirety this documentary project, *Collective Autonomy* spells anything but simplicity. John Richard Shand has, since the early 1980s, not only recognized but often committed to published print, the ongoing efforts of this endeavor. John's well informed yet innate ability with the written word, combined with an uncanny predilection to find balance between heart and head, has always ensured the kind of appraisal that a truly creative project needs in order that it benefit from objective dialogue and subsequent communicative development. His personal views, and oft asked, probing, sometimes confrontational inquiries and suggestions, have always proven to be an enormous benefit, often giving me good cause to rethink and consider things from a different perspective. As with Steve, so too with John: 'genuine', and 'heart-felt', are the ideal adjectives to accompany their personhood.

Important in the process of development has been the contribution made by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (hereafter, ABC). To state the obvious, without their having recorded over the years my esoteric efforts, this reproduction project would not be possible. Almost all the material is drawn from ABC recordings. Bearing in mind that at the time of these performances this material was on the edge, out in left field, and certainly not the bearer of popular appeal, that the various ABC producers saw value in making the recordings has been a genuine boon to the creative growth of *Collective Autonomy*, helping, through broadcasts and personal contact to widen the field of exchange. Among these producers I'd like here to make special mention of Cleon Dennis. In 1976 Cleon, with assistance from Jose Gabby, facilitated and produced the recording of *Primal Communication*. This, the first version, was written before I could make even the most modest claims at being a composer. It was written entirely on inspiration and, with invaluable help at the time from composer/arranger, Bill Motzing, was recorded in the old ABC studios, Forbes St., just above William St., King's Cross, Sydney. Although this recording will not be reproduced in *Of Other Narratives* – the second version (1988) standing in its place – Cleon's contribution through the belief he placed in this "Work" has returned time and again to lend support to what has by now become a very long line of development traced by *Collective Autonomy*. *Primal Communication* was my first 'real' experiment in this field. More will be said about the "Work" – its concept and philosophy – and those involved in its realization in the liner-notes to CD-3 of this series.

The theory and practice of *Collective Autonomy* find their meeting place in dialogue initiated by the performance process. This means both verbal, and musical dialogue. It also means the kind of dialogue that happens between people through body-language – gesture, the exchanges realized through glance and presence. The often difficult nature of performing *Collective Autonomy* "Works" has necessitated extensive rehearsal and personal practice time. *Collective Autonomy* has benefitted enormously through the good will and kind-hearted attention the many performers have offered our collaborations with unstinting enthusiasm and devotion. More will be said about these tremendously talented people in due course:

Miwako ABE, David Ades, The Astra Choir—dir. John McCaughey, Katie Black, Rachel Bremner, Katharine Brockman, Conservatorium of Tasmania String Orchestra, Simone De Haan, Carl Dewhurst, Geoff Dodd, Ros Dunlop, Steve Elphick, Roger Frampton, Bobby Gebert, Barry Guy, Michael Kieran Harvey, Mardi McCullea, David Miller, Pipeline Contemporary Music Project, Daryl Pratt, Mark Simmonds, Cindy Watkin, and Christian Wojtowicz.

Phil Treloar/Feeling to Thought extends genuine gratitude to these mighty musicians for their permission and support to proceed with this reproduction project, *Of Other Narratives*.

I consider it a genuine honor that some of these recordings have been floating around the ‘underground’ for several years. Let me quote just two instances where this has recently come to my attention:

“[There is an unreleased trio recording] with [Mark Simmonds], Phil Treloar and Bobby Gebert, and it is absolutely astounding. It’s up there with any of the best music I’ve ever heard in my life. I was going to relate it to those classic Coltrane Quartet recordings, because the energy of it is the same as that, and the beauty of it as well – and it’s not just that the energy sounds aggressive or whatever; there’s all this love in it ... This stuff should be available ... it’s a really exciting part of our history.”

(With permission: Julien Wilson, quoted in John Shand, 2009, *JAZZ – The Australian Accent*, p. 142.)

“Yesterday I was in Melbourne and heard a recording you made with Mark Simmonds and Bobby Gebert. It’s one of the most incredible recordings I’ve ever heard, the groups energy and interaction is extraordinary and your playing is amazing. I’m so glad to hear this as I have many powerful memories of your playing but no recordings.”

(With permission: Simon Barker, private correspondence, May 30, 2006)

Needless to say, my gratitude for these observations is enormous. Somehow this music has been kept alive by a precious body of committed people. Appraisals such as these lend support to and substantiate the worth of one’s communicative efforts even when, as is the case with me, one has no knowledge of them being in circulation. It is precisely this kind of enthusiasm and commitment to the creative moment that helps to keep the fires burning and to share the warmth of collective spirit. That these musicians recognize this means it abides in their own creative expression. However, Simon’s comment, “but no recordings” is indicative of the general milieu. He means of course, no recordings at hand; readily available. *Of Other Narratives* seeks to fill this gap, at least where *Collective Autonomy* is concerned. These observations have helped give impetus to the long and complex task of reproduction.

I think it’s important for those interested in the current ethos of creative ‘boarder-crossing’—cross-cultural, cross-genre orientations, multi-cultural—that this was once a marginalized pursuit; one that met with strong resistance from the more conservative, hegemonic quarters. On the other hand though, the twee practices of ‘World Music’ – borrowings and imitations for superficial, ‘popularist’ effect – have been made financially viable pursuits by a music industry whose only concern has been one of financial gain. This is not an indictment regarding ‘boarder-crossing’ *per se* but rather it’s a criticism of the way some genuine efforts have been, or allowed themselves to be, appropriated. Put succinctly, I propose a call to responsibility. If we care about the spirit of our work in its relation to a humane world we need to be vigilant. I think this is a serious concern and I hope *Of Other Narratives* will help provide grounds for, and give rise to, questions and moves by musico-creative practitioners that will assist as a counter-appropriation. For an in depth discussion from a personal perspective regarding this particular matter I direct the reader to my essay included in the recently published, *of Paradox Once Found*. From a more general point of view see *Reflections, Projections – a note on my work in Collective Autonomy*, which can be accessed on this website. (Go to: Menu>Writings>Monograph One

Collective Autonomy has been my life-long dream. In a sense, I’d describe it as a natural predilection. It seems to have been with me forever. It has drawn the focus of my attention and energy for almost as long as I can remember. This predilection has not always had a name nor, to begin with, a specific direction, at least not one of conscious making. But as my efforts proceeded and clarity slowly increased, as I

delved into its depths, I came to understand that my intentions seemed to have always embraced one essential thing, to wit, that people engage with, and express freely, their own, considered, perspective. As a child I saw this as a naturally positive thing and continue to see it thus. John Shand, in defining the ‘what-ness’ of *Collective Autonomy* as he understands it to be, recently suggested that it is “an idea that seeks to liberate the individual through the power of creative collaboration and the embracing of interdependence.” (Shand, 2009, p. 76). Yes indeed. It is this. But, and as I think Shand is well aware, more than being an idea, or a concept lending itself to neat definition, *Collective Autonomy* lies on a field of process; process that more or less defies definition and instead, finds, and looks for, ways to dislocate altogether, fixed positions. If, in its light, positions themselves refuse change then it will change the context in which these abide. In this respect *Collective Autonomy* has much in common with the ‘deconstruction’ of Jacques Derrida and is, I would suggest, as difficult to talk about. Just as ‘deconstruction’ functions at a great distance from being a prescriptive system, so too does *Collective Autonomy*. But, as with ‘deconstruction’, it is equally far from being a case of ‘anything goes’. It is more a matter of having a deep, active, mindful, accountable, and responsible engagement with ‘how’ and ‘why’ it goes, *as* it goes, leaving the door wide open for it to go some other way next time. It does not concern itself with ‘product’ but rather with process. It embraces integrity. It embraces meaningful, communicative relationships. It embraces traditions without seeking to nail them down. Indeed, it enables the possibility to view traditions in various contexts without reducing them to the status of mere utility. Difference is an active constituent and not something to be nominalized, normalized, and reified. But at the same time, and crucially, the most intricate, finely nuanced structures might be employed in any one of its processes of emergence. These are never fixed however. Indeed, structure is significant. But also, variously circumstantial. Functional engagement with its processes is fundamental to its understanding.

I coined the term, *Collective Autonomy*, in 1987. This terminology, significantly, made a public appearance September 14, 1988, as a program note for a concert presenting my work in the Australian Bicentennial concert series, ‘New Directions - A Preview of the Nineties’. Particular emphasis was there placed on the aspect of ‘process’ as a central concern, and of the communicative problems brought into play by the imposition of categorical boundaries. These were matters I’d problematized and seen as intrinsic to creative music-making. Questions pertaining to ‘process’ as evolving form, and ‘categorical boundaries’ as imposed restriction to creative effluence I’d come to realize as interrelated. And while I saw traditions as positive bearers of communicative essence, I confronted their appropriation as hegemonic entities. In a published interview – *Sounds Australian: Australian Music Center Journal*, Autumn 1988, pp. 8 ~ 10 – Brian Brown, as guest editor for this special issue, pursued this with me, focussing the discussion on his concern, expressed as follows: “I’ve always felt that Australia is, *and should know that it is*, capable of realizing its own improvised music cum composition.” (Emphasis mine) I’d suggest the entire issue to be well worth a read, especially nowadays, more than twenty years after publication. And just by the bye, Brian Brown, in my view, has made a contribution to creative life in Australia beyond measure.

Between then and the time of this writing I’ve carried out extensive research concerning these aspects and specifically, their meeting at the intersection of improvised and composed/notated musics. Just recently this intersection broadened further to include textual materials. Shand’s defining terminology above makes a mindful incision into understanding with his use of the word, ‘interdependence’, suggesting that no constituent is entirely isolated from others; that they touch or interpenetrate each other to some degree. His use of the word, ‘collaboration’ accords well with this. And this is significant, though I point out that notions of interaction are able to operate, subtly, at many levels and not only the overt, as might be signaled by a term like, for example, ‘call and response’. I recently

discovered the creative potential and intrinsic value in interaction dislocated from real-time. Spontaneity left on hold as it were; suspended, yet with no loss of energy and focus due to this suspension while, during the period of suspension, tremendous gain deriving from the clarity of shifting perspective. This, however, takes us beyond the scope of the present reproduction project and time-frame proposed but does clearly indicate the extent to which *Collective Autonomy* can be, and has been, cast.

It is not my intention to fully expound herein the intricacies of *Collective Autonomy* – relationships between its dimensions of philosophy and creative music-making. That task is better left to a book-length exegesis. However, there will be occasion to delve a little into technical areas. Although deeply penetrating theoretical knowledge may not be necessary for an instrumental performance of the music itself, it has been absolutely essential to my reaching the kind of understanding that has allowed this particular creative environment to come into being with, notably, clarity of purpose. So called ‘intuitive’ inspirations, insights, and motivations, are one thing. Providing these with fertile ground in which they might flourish is a matter for years of disciplined research and practical application, experimentation and documentation, making mistakes then figuring out how or why these occurred. There are no short cuts nor ‘quick fixes’. Research is a slow, time consuming aspect of the process. In my view, thought processes are every bit the equal of hands-on music-making. The two are inextricably linked. They help illuminate and clarify each other. Growth, clarity, and understanding results from their cooperation. *Of Other Narratives* spells out a few of the visible, more substantial landmarks in this long process of cooperation.

It is crucial to point out that *Collective Autonomy*’s processes of emergence have never been dependent on ‘style’—neither compositional nor performance—in order that realization be achieved. Nevertheless, the observation is a fair one, that, in consideration of the performances documented herein, style, in various ways and degrees, is present. This is not the point however. What is significant is that style is not a binding element; something that glues the music—its composition and performance—together, and without which it might fall apart. Style, as generally interpreted, tends to draw people towards modes of behavior consonant with some predetermined model. And in this I don’t deny possible relevancies. But with *Collective Autonomy*, creative engagement has been paramount since the beginning, not a focus on one’s established ability to produce certain musical goods on demand and, particularly, as these may accord with some kind of imported model. Thus, the people represented in *Of Other Narratives* have been, by and large, the kind of creative individuals who have searched for their own voice, irrespective of the various genres they’ve chosen as a means towards their voice-finding. And indeed, these have tended to be people who forge a new, or at least, a different, path in the process. In effect, this indicates their having sought ways to discover some kind of ground in which to plant and nurture a relationship between themselves and the music they’ve chosen to play, thus manifesting creative potential through a form of dialogue that embraces, to some degree at least, original, personal, input. This should not be read superficially. One of the major difficulties in providing compositional material in *Collective Autonomy* has been to do with facilitating forms and structures without these becoming stultifying to creative predilections; without getting in the way of individual expression whilst facilitating a ground for potential unity. Thus, the journey through *Of Other Narratives* provides a ‘bird’s-eye’ view of various attempts to address this profoundly difficult problem, one that *Collective Autonomy* has grappled with in a way that enables people’s abiding abilities as naturally creative beings to be foundational to the creative exchange as made manifest. An observation passed recently bears out the crucial significance and beneficence of this, beyond the ken of those directly engaged:

“[And] as I said, people like you and Mark [Simmonds] gave me (and others) a kind of 'permission' to be ourselves, to see that our music is somehow related to jazz without having to play some sort of 'proper' jazz.”

(With permission: Will Guthrie, personal communication, May 21, 2009)

This observation makes very clear the crucial necessity to address the question of ‘style’, if for no reason other than it defusing the imperative to perform institutional, mechanically oriented forms of ‘roll playing’. In so far as it does this, it opens up space for creative exchange based on natural predilection. This certainly does not imply a lack of discipline but does, and powerfully so, bring into question where, how, and for what purpose, disciplines might be applied. It lays wide open the possibility to remove altogether the prevalent hegemony of music as metaphor; as a symbol that bears little, if any, personal reality other than one’s ability to imitate. It lays wide open the potential for people to share Otherness in a way that is mutually beneficial. The extent to which this sharing is realized will be largely dependent upon the people involved on any given occasion and their willingness to fully engaged with the process. Though not precluded altogether, stylized roll-playing bears very little to offer this environment.

In 2007 I attempted, for the *n*th. time, a definition of *Collective Autonomy*:

Collective Autonomy identifies a dynamic field in which agents, exploring concepts of universality and multiplicity, seek harmonious co-habitation through processes of creative interaction, *discovering* both common sense and individual perception as the play of potential-bearing perspectives, and where integration is an option rather than an *a priori* imperative.

It may well be the case that no further definition will be forthcoming because, as pointed out above, the process ensures ever-changing parameters and terms of relationship; the ground itself remains in constant flux. On the field of *Collective Autonomy*, definition, it seems, amounts to little more than the futile pursuit of reification, where in fact what counts as contributive is engagement with the creative process; rather than the reiteration of established terminology thus generating product, engagement with process as a coming into being.