

O My Friends . . .

On Friendship and Artistic Practice

Part I

I am going to have to wander all alone

Friendship, in its common form, is a personal relationship between two people involving some degree of intimacy and care. Building upon shared activities, friends help to shape who we are—our values, tastes, and interests. As Anaïs Nin wrote, “Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.”¹ Beyond its primary role in our emotional lives, there is a particular kind of friendship, a type of intimate relation that resides in what can be described as artistic friendship, edifying and feeding creative endeavors. I am not referring here to artistic collaboration, a subject about which much has been written,² nor am I concerned with artists who happen to be friends. Rather this essay seeks to sketch a more specific aspect of amicable association, a form of relation where artists correspond and share, among other things, the progress of their work and mutual confidences that in turn bring greater intimacy and entanglements to the creative process. Drawing on my own experiences, observations, and reflections as an artist and writer as well as research on creative relationships, I explore friendship as it relates to artistic practice. Of Germanic origin, the word friend or *freond* in Old English originally meant ‘to love’. Motivated by a deep affection for my artist friends, this project is an exercise in love. And it is here that we enter the story.

From its earliest examples, philosophy has taken up friendship as a fundamental aspect of critical inquiry. Philosophers, ancient and contemporary, have pursued the subject of friendship with varying degrees of piety and veneration. Aristotle, Michel de *Montaigne*, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Chantal Mouffe, and Avital Ronell—to name but a few—have examined and shared their reflections on this genial affection.³ In Books VIII and IX of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, where it was referred to as *philia* or love, Aristotle examined friendship as one of the more important virtues. Indeed the word *philia* is sometimes translated directly as friendship. According to the philosopher one cannot live without friends, and yet it is also possible to have too many friends, suggesting that there is only so much fidelity to go around.

Aristotle may also be proposing the opposite, that there is no such thing as 'friend' in the singular, further highlighting the complexity of the singular relation. The phrase "O my friends, there is no friend" (*o philoi, oudeis philos*), attributed to Aristotle via Montaigne, informs much of Jacques Derrida's book *The Politics of Friendship*. This is a strong theme in philosophical observations on friendship. Working with a text by Diogenes, Giorgio Agamben offers an alternate translation, "He who has (many) friends, has no friend" or "He who has (many) friends can have no true friend."⁴ The implications and nuances are, like a good friendship, wonderfully complicated.

Indeed Agamben shows how friendship "is closely linked to the very definition of philosophy [so] that one can say that without it, philosophy would not in fact be possible. The intimacy of friendship and philosophy is so deep that philosophy includes *philos*, the friend, in its very name."⁵ This consubstantiality suggests that friendship and love are intimately related, inextricably intertwined yet with a caveat, according to the literature, that the profound and elevated experience of friendship is shared predominantly among men.⁶ In his discussion of Derrida's work on the subject, Agamben refers to this gender bias, noting that: "One of the concerns of the book is, in fact, a critique of what the author defines as the phallogocentric conception of friendship that dominates our philosophical and political tradition."⁷ Having come to a similar assessment on my own, I was only slightly relieved to read this.

Montaigne is particularly imperious in his misogynistic assessment of friendship and gender suggesting that women do not have the *quality of soul* to sustain deep and edifying relations. Given the time in which he lived (1533–1592), this attitude is perhaps not surprising and yet its wholesale rejection of the possibility of friendship among women remains egregious. Among his more pompous observations Montaigne states: "Moreover, to say truth, the ordinary talent of women is not such as is sufficient to maintain the conference and communication required to the support of this sacred tie; nor do they appear to be endued with constancy of mind, to sustain the pinch of so hard and durable a knot."⁸ Attempts to support his position with invocations of the *more perfect male soul* or the absence of "the common consent of the ancient schools" demonstrate not only a conservative contribution to the subject, but a lack of imagination.⁹

Even today, perhaps by the common consent of the contemporary schools, proportionately little philosophical or reflective writing by female authors on the subject of friendship has been published signaling that not

only is friendship among women underestimated, it is also underrepresented. Apparently, the subject is explored in the more “feminine” and feminized genres of fiction and autobiography. Most recent scholarship by both women and men on the subject has addressed the significance of collaboration and romantic partnership to artistic practice, but with little acknowledgment of the historical and ongoing gender bias thereby replicating it. This meagerness of analysis deserves its own extended examination. For example: how have masculinist conceptions of friendship further excluded those who are not represented or embodied within the gender binary?

What has been taken up repeatedly in recent philosophical writing is the deep association between friendship and mortality. Fundamental to friendship, according to Derrida, is its concomitant affiliation with death. What does it mean to reckon with death, or with the specter of death among the living and those we are close to? For death is presaged in every impassioned conversation and its inevitable terminus. In *The Work of Mourning*, a compelling collection of memorial essays, Derrida addresses the difficulty, or rather the impossibility of saying good-bye to a departed friend. His eulogy for fellow thinker Gilles Deleuze titled “I’m Going to have to Wander All Alone,” is a heartbreaking tribute to a vanished accord. The last paragraph begins: “I am going to continue—or begin again—to read Gilles Deleuze in order to learn, and I’m going to have to wander all alone in that long discussion that we should have had together... And I would have tried to say to him why his thought has never left me for nearly forty years. How could it do so now?”¹⁰ Capturing the profound connection of a meaningful friendship tied as it is here to creative output, these words point to the aporia that opens when that affection is altered by the cessation of life.

In an essay titled “Friendship” honouring his bond with the French intellectual and literary figure Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot offers a poignant and poetic homage to his departed friend as the proximate yet unknowable other, where friendship is configured as an infinite distance in relation: “We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement.”¹¹ An underlying aspect of philosophical writing on friendship is, if not strictly speaking alienation, then perhaps recognition of an abyss that cannot be crossed even among the living. Despite amicable kinship and *philia*, friendship is an incommensurable relation of one to an other. The distance cannot be bridged except by our shared mortality, in dying ceaselessly.

That friendship is a contradictory phenomenon, a dialectical desire, both affirmed and denied, avowed and disavowed, is evident in the equivocal and often ambiguous discussions on the subject. For Derrida the political realm of friendship links to ethics and law, to values of equality and especially in regard to democracy. Following Derrida, Chantal Mouffe emphasizes the political frames, which she describes as “the dimension of antagonism—the friend/enemy distinction.”¹² She addresses how antagonism, especially in the public sphere, broadcasts and exposes necessary differences in opinion. Recognizing the potential offered by Mouffe’s analysis, I see that adversarial relations and conflict can have a beneficial role in a creative friendship, particularly in more private encounters when negotiated through the activity of art making. Addressing the political by way of self and other, Mouffe acknowledges the complicated terrain within which the friend/enemy distinction is situated. She describes the way in which morality is an ever-present potentiality in any relation and states:

What I call “politics,” [...] is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to and reproduce a certain order. These are always in conditions that are potentially conflictual because they are always informed by, or traversed by, the dimension of “the political.”¹³

Here “the political” implies rhetorical and aesthetic gestures that challenge us with their content while also asking something of us in their offering, in their relation. Perhaps another way to think about Mouffe’s friend/enemy distinction is to consider whether an artwork as a social phenomenon can be a gesture of friendship, a reaching toward the viewer that animates individual sensation and public expression. Perhaps I digress here away from creative friendship between two artists to something else, something more abstract and general. Yet Mouffe brings our attention to the importance of antagonism, which is crucial to my understanding of creative friendship. How are we challenged and engaged in a dialogue between subject and object? What kinds of affective sensory connections are made in exchanges not only between friends but also things? As may be evident, I am interested here not in an exclusively harmonious exchange between two like-minded artists, but the inevitable tension that arises when ambition meets creative vision, and where the incommensurable and antagonistic nourish the imagination. Ralph Waldo Emerson describes this relation as necessary to intimate engagement:

Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness,

that piques each with the presence of power and of consent in the other party... I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance... Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo... Let there be an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity, which beneath these disparities unites them.¹⁴

Creative friendships are an alchemical interaction that produces something singularly unimaginable with the incorporation of two mutually variegated yet simultaneously imbricated dispositions. A strong will coupled with a commitment to maintain a friendship are necessary when rivalry and self-interest mingle with admiration and wonder. As Emerson noted: "I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage."¹⁵ Artistic friendships are often informed by differences that generate productive critique which in turn lead to closeness, trust, and the deepening of a mutual bond.

In fact philosopher Avital Ronell in her discussion of Friedrich Nietzsche describes this relation of antagonism as an energized separateness that calls for relentless distance. Accordingly, a good friendship requires a degree of disidentification in that the very attractiveness of the friend is found in her distinctness.¹⁶ This disidentification enables us to see our friend as a worthy adversary, sharing both thought and argument. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche suggests that there may be duration to friendship—friendships begin and end all the time—which changes character. I offer the extended quote here as an anchor for this trajectory of thought:

We were friends and have become estranged. But this was right, and we do not want to conceal and obscure it from ourselves as if we had reason to feel ashamed. We are two ships each of which has its goal and course; our paths may cross and we may celebrate a feast together, as we did—and then the good ships rested so quietly in one harbor and one sunshine that it may have looked as if they had reached their goal and as if they had one goal. But then the almighty force of our tasks drove us apart again into different seas and sunny zones, and perhaps we shall never see one another again,—perhaps we shall meet again but fail to recognize each other: our exposure to different seas and suns has changed us! That we have to become estranged is the law above us: by the same token we should also become more venerable for each other! And thus the memory of our former friendship should become more sacred! There is probably a

tremendous but invisible stellar orbit in which our very different ways and goals may be included as small parts of this path—let us rise up to this thought! But our life is too short and our power of vision too small for us to be more than friends in the sense of this sublime possibility—Let us then believe in our star friendship even if we should be compelled to be earth enemies.¹⁷

Artistic friendships often endure a range of emotions due to shared networks of association and affiliation. These conflicts are made manifest in the competition generated by juried exhibitions and grant applications as well as the studio visits by curators that can build careers and further complicate relationships. Indeed competition, which has always been a factor in the art world, has increased exponentially. While there are more graduates of MFA programs than ever before, resources—for support, exhibition and representation—are steadily dwindling. The increasing professionalization of the artist has made art a high stakes activity. Heightened efficiency “from making art to exhibiting it, curating, writing, teaching, thinking of imaginative ways to document art or advertise it, sell it, use it to sell other things—has generated an image of consummate professionalism, the feeling that everyone knows exactly what they are doing and how to behave.”¹⁸ It can also make artists feel insecure, apprehensive and, antagonistic even, or perhaps especially, towards their artist friends.

As my friend once put it, “Art destroys goodness and can drive a wedge between friends.” This antagonism may simply be the result of competition and rivalry, but the situation is surely more complicated. In the realm of art and artists, there is often a degree of attraction and repulsion. Attraction to like-minded individuals, similar drives, and shared sensibilities can draw artists closer together. For a variety of reasons we find it easy to talk to one another and be in the same company. Yet, repulsion and even hostility may set in when values, temperaments, and aspirations evolve as a result of social and economic contingencies. One individual might be invited to parties that the other is not, indicating how networks of association fluctuate and recalibrate, which in turn makes for awkwardness between previously compatible comrades. As some careers orbit new environments and stratospheres, others move in divergent trajectories and at differing velocities. As they transform, art practices take on distinct momentums and rhythms. Of course these friendships operate in and as multiple modalities and intensities, which may well be a healthy necessity. But as paths diverge, what was once the proximity and intimacy of conversation shifts

from primary to secondary importance. It takes courage for a friendship to withstand the ascendancy of one artist in apparent contrast to another. The relation might survive if honesty and direct communication are maintained though these are not always possible when priorities and social networks increasingly take center stage.

Part II

Art as an activity

With this all too brief foray into its philosophical substrate, we are now better situated to consider some of the particularities of artistic friendship, a type of affinity and affection that nourishes even as it forsakes. Here is a model of companionship that fosters shared activity and creative exchange as well as emotional and intellectual succor. Art making is simultaneously private and social, enacting and engaging both individual exploration and public discourse. In many ways, it is a product of historical precedent, cultural context, and public presentation; to be relevant an artist needs to be in dialogue with her generation. At the same time, much of the creative process emerges through private conversation. A privately public affair (or public private), an artwork is fabricated in conjunction with others, often through confidential exchanges, whether in the studio, during a walk, or over a beer. But now I wonder if I am getting ahead of myself... I think it may be necessary to take another approach in order to be more precise as to what is meant by such terms as 'art', 'art making' and 'the creative process.'

I understand and engage art as a series of activities and relations rather than as an object: this is in part due to the destructive effects that the latter mode of aesthetic engagement has on friendship. In the first instance, when referring to art I am addressing all forms of creativity where imagination and intellect meet skill, ingenuity, and inventiveness. While my focus here is on visual art, other types of aesthetic expression including writing, dance, music, and theatre are intimately related. What is most significant is that art is understood or engaged as an activity, rather than as the product of those activities. This distinction is crucial, as it might well constitute the difference between artistic friendship and artistic rivalry. Art, in this context, is the process and experience of shaping an idea into a form; it is not the form itself. Art is not the reification of a concept into an object; the object presents only a trace of the concept. When art is at the stage of being framed, objectified, or curated it can quickly become something else, something that is no longer experiential and expressive but a commodity, a thing. What I am concerned

with is the exchange of ideas in the process of making, the unfolding of a concept that struggles to find its material form even as it hovers in the realm of immaterial inspiration. Thus art, if only in this context, is a process, a series of actions, a form in formation, and a performance. It is simultaneously a corporeal and cerebral practice that is time based, dynamic and, if one is lucky, illuminating.

Like art, friendship is an activity and not a thing. It is an actant where assemblages are entered into with materials and individuals, and further modified by each new encounter. First coined by Bruno Latour the term denotes a network of human and non-human actors in relation with one another. As political theorist Jane Bennett describes in her book *Vibrant Matter*, an actant “is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.”¹⁹ As one of many factors in the creative process, a good friendship generates an aesthetic-affective openness where a word, a gesture, or even a smile can be the necessary catalyst for something new to reveal itself. In other words it can provoke an affective charge. In this way artistic friendships are understood as conative—aspects of mental processes and behavior directed toward impulse, desire, and striving—toward action. Powerful alliances can enhance the imagination and produce generative activity. But like an electromagnetic force their charge can switch from positive to negative, repelling what used to attract. While the shifting velocities and momentum of artistic practices can produce destructive collisions, their ruptures can constructively transform friendships and practices.

Creative friendships enjoy conversations that are inspiring, sustaining, and endlessly surprising. Operating within an artistic context that celebrates originality and the ongoing illusions of individual achievement and artistic genius, we often fail to recognize the importance of cultural and social dialogue. In the era of relational aesthetics, social practice, and participatory arts, creative circles are and always have been central to how a work of art takes form. Vera John-Steiner, in her book *Creative Collaborations*, argues that we are enjoying a long overdue transition from the age of the individual to the era of community. Perhaps we can see more clearly how the epistemic subject (the lone seeker of knowledge and creative expression) increasingly shares the stage with intersubjectivity and the inherently social experience of the human imagination. As Aristotle once noted: “For friendship is community, and as we are in relation to ourselves, so we are in relation to a friend.”²⁰

Setting aside the all too real and clearly necessary experience of individual inspiration, I am drawn to making a space for the considerable role that friendship, fellowship, and a sense of community have in the creative process, and the inevitable competition and potential antagonisms that foster new ideas and novel ways of doing things. This speaks to friendship as an alternate form of kinship, where conflict occurs but within a space of “consensual affiliation.”²¹ Kinship can be the result of friendship or, put another way, friendship can replace structures of kinship that are no longer tenable or livable. Rather than a connection via lineage or blood, the sphere of social relations is formed through the affinity of creative kinships. And by opening up the concept of kinship to a broader community, we are better situated to enjoy a livable life that fosters creativity and experimentation while acknowledging and sheltering difference.

The process of critique is an important part of the communal nature and a core element of art as an activity. In art school students are subjected to the pedagogical experience of the studio critique mapping out a range of strategies that are ostensibly aimed towards making their work better. In studio critiques students show their artwork and then witness and/or participate in a discussion of their project involving varying degrees of engagement and truthfulness on the part of their peers and instructors. Often these sessions comprise a cold reading and an exploration of a work’s material-semiotic implications drawing on a range of discourses as the process unfolds. While an important part of the creative process, the opportunity for artists to hear what others think of a work in progress often ends at graduation. For this reason, artistic friendships carry the advantages of generative critique beyond art school and into a flourishing practice, particularly when a friend can tell you that a work is not yet there without being cruel or hurtful. A mutual affair, my concern is not just what a friend does for us but what one does as a friend thus underscoring shared responsibilities and affects. The benefits of encouragement and generative feedback extend the learning process especially when informed by a commitment to communal values and ideals.

Part III

Singularity

Philia or love as friendship involves an intellectual and psychological identification where two distinct sensibilities come together to form an accord of sorts. The desire to be near and visit one’s friend feeds the

imagination. In *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work*

Michael P. Farrell describes the formation of an artistic friendship:

In the early stages of interaction in a collaborative pair, the exchanges between the members could be characterized as ordinary social support. They exchange resources, validate one another's identities as serious professionals, and provide emotional support to one another during crises... As the relationship continues, the value of the exchanges may escalate, so that the process of exchange begins to resemble a courtship... Through gradual escalation of the depth of self-disclosures and the value of the exchanges, the pair tests one another's readiness to expand the scope of the relationship.²²

A certain trust emerges between friends who share their works in progress that creates an extended critique when honest and engaged feedback may otherwise be in short supply. Through regular studio visits artistic friendships can influence and shape one another's practices. The dynamics of this particular friendship relation involve mutually influencing each other's sense of value and aesthetic engagement. Receptivity to a friend's artistic interpretations evolves our interests and trajectories while energizing one's solitary practice. As an interlocutor, a friend might admire an aspect of a project that was not recognized so clearly by its author, allowing for a new understanding and potentially changing the direction of the work.

Companionship, inspiration, and trusting affection between friends are drawn out through a shared interest in form making and the enriching experience of time spent together. This singular intimacy and conjoined disposition can beguile. How a friend responds to cultural phenomena or a visual artifact further deepens the bonds that are cultivated through such exchanges. In his memorial essay honouring Deleuze, Derrida captures the discernment that feeds one's own perceptions inducing a deeper attentiveness to things: "I also want to say right here [in *Libération*] that I loved and admired the way—which was always just right—he treated images, newspapers, television, the whole public sphere and the transformation it had undergone in recent years."²³ Friends can enlarge and extend each other's visual and conceptual experience: in this sense artistic friendship becomes constitutive of the individual, their maturing sensibility, and the artwork that they do.

A significant element in an artistic friendship, and friendships in general, is sentiment, that is, how each one feels in the other's company. This singular sensation is produced when two distinct sensibilities come together to

create a space for mutual discovery and enjoyment. And in this way no two friendships are alike. As an embodied experience, friendship operates in multiple modalities—not only by way of the heart and intellect, but also the mouth, eye, ear, and skin. The domain of sensation, an aesthetic-affective openness, generates delight and disturbance. I believe that these ruptures are important in catalyzing a sense of wonder and estrangement with regard to one's own work rather than perpetuating habits and ideological flows. "We know nothing about a person," Jane Bennett tells us, "until we know their affect, what they are and how they can and cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body...to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with in composing another more powerful body."²⁴ Much of artistic friendship involves tacit understandings and affinities that, as Anaïs Nin wrote, represent "a world in us possibly not born until they arrive." Thus an aesthetic-affective openness involves engagement in at least two registers; as emotional receptivity as well as in the potential for influence and transformation.

Artistic friendships are sustained by reciprocity, whether through the sharing of ideas, critical feedback, or a sense of spaciousness that engenders exploration. Another way to describe this alliance is the manner in which being in another's company shines a light on one's own thoughts, processes, and practice. On the one hand there is a quality of illumination that a friend brings to one's work, revealing flaws as well as virtues. On the other hand, a certain, invisible light emanates from an artist friend making one's own progress somehow less arduous, more joyful. In both cases, light fills the air and energy propels one forward. In her biography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton takes up the metaphor of illumination. "The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humor or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like inter-arching searchlights."²⁵ This metaphor of light offers visibility to that which was in the shadows. Whether it offers truth I will leave to the Platonists and St Augustine. What I do know is that light, or perhaps lightness, expresses, for me, a sense of awakening and presence. Indeed, Derrida couples the theme of illumination with the leitmotif of death that pervades much of his writing.

Rarity accords with the phenomenon, it vibrates with light, brilliance, and glory. If one names and cites the best friends, those who have illustrated 'true and perfect friendship', it is because this friendship comes to *illuminate*. It illustrates itself, makes happy or successful

things shine, gives them visibility, renders them more resplendent... It gives rise to a project, the anticipation, the perspective, the providence of a hope that illuminates in advance the future... thereby transporting the name's renown beyond death.²⁶

References to friendship and light are abundant, signaling how significant the relation of friendship can be to one's own illumination. Sparking moments of luminosity, artistic friendships may rekindle inner fires that may have otherwise gone out. An enlightening friendship can also show us how to make room for and inhabit the shadows. In this way the singularity of an artistic friendship recognizes the other as a stranger and, though sometimes confused, sometimes enlightening, the affect is in the sensation where something new is made visible.

Part IV

Across Space and Time

Just as each artistic friendship is characteristic of the individuals who constitute it, each stage of the affiliation reveals multiple forms of intimacy that we encounter in life. The slowly deepening rapport that emerges over decades is in sharp contrast to the formative years where melodrama and unpredictability are often at play. Many alliances begin in art school whether in undergraduate or graduate programs where individuals are in intense proximity for an extended period. Studios are side-by-side prompting spontaneous conversations. Weekly lectures, seminars, and critiques regularly bring classmates together in a heady mixture of experimentation, eroticism, and intellectual curiosity. Evenings (and days) may be spent in a bar, the school cafeteria or a local park during clement weather. Some friendships emerge through the invariable contact at parties, art openings, symposia, and group exhibitions. This youthful intensity inevitably shifts and evolves to life beyond academia and the security of ritualized college life.

Many important artistic friendships are initiated in art school or when the individuals are still in their twenties. This is a time when one deconstructs the world, making sense of art history, critical theory, and in the process potential trajectories and values emerge. In these precocious years one often encounters other artists through socializing at openings, art events and residencies, which can make for an intense exchange of ideas. Often all consuming, these encounters lay the groundwork for potentially enriching friendships when one has responsibilities other than endless socializing at parties and in groups. As one matures thinking often shifts towards putting

the world back together, which is concurrent with figuring out how to set up a life of making and being an artist. Being caught up in the day-to-day cycle of work, relationships, debt, and time in the studio makes it difficult to have intimate conversations around one's practice. And yet the need for connection and ongoing creative sustenance continues albeit in new forms and via new social engagements. Often long-term friendships grow out of some initial collaboration and shared production where a close encounter with another's work and process has deepened the sense of connection, solidarity, and alliance. One gets close not only to the person, but also to their practice, thus forming a kind of accord with both the person and their work. The activity of art making is about a kind of intimacy with people, materials, and ideas. In this way art itself can be understood as a gesture of friendship where the friend makes a connection to the other's inventiveness, risk taking, and creative sensibility. On the way and over an extended period of time, an artistic rapprochement forms, unfolds, and deepens.

Amiable association is also encouraged through teaching where friendships, especially those between teachers and students, evolve and mature beyond the educational context. The process of guiding someone in their pursuit of knowledge can develop into friendship. Though most of these exchanges remain at the institutional level, they can also grow to be fruitful attachments. Mutual excitement around a subject, a shared sensibility, and the search for insight can dissolve hierarchal structures and bring people closer together. Within the intensity of art seminars, tutorials, and studio critiques, artists gain exposure to a range of artistic sensibilities from how someone approaches a project or course of inquiry to developing a mode of communication that often destabilizes the traditional student-teacher dynamic. This liveliness points to the positive relationality that thrives within creative frameworks where artist peers are engaged in teaching one another, where teacher and student are of similar age and often of equal social or career standing, and where the sharing of skills can establish life-long connections, whether as artist peers or as mentor-student, forms of association quite specific to creative communities. I do wonder why these particular forms of association are produced among artists. Perhaps it is the result of opening oneself to another's personal microcosm, exposing those qualities of childlike inquisitiveness at the heart of the artistic process. My own experience has been that artistic affiliations often take me on a bewildering journey into another cosmology, towards another unfolding universe.

The constitution of artistic friendships increasingly takes place across geographical space and long stretches of time. Many artists enjoy long-distance friendships that are often the result of initial and intense encounters while students. Alliances across oceans and time zones feel important especially when they may have begun face to face whether in grad school, through local art communities, or while at an art residency. Operating as micro-global communities, these friendships in absentia are productive for many reasons including the connections that they afford to other places as well as the excuses they engender for letter writing, extended emails, and video chats. Perhaps they succeed because of the very absences that do indeed make the heart grow fonder. While these friendships are not sustained by geographical proximity, they do foster intimacy and ongoing dialogue. Friendships across space and time zones are about having an extended cultural community; they are part of envisioning oneself in other locations and benefiting from exposure to different cultures where one is aligned with others beyond immediate geographies.

An important aspect of artistic friendships, especially for women, is around the practicalities of studio and work life, negotiating the still evident gender imbalance with regard to exhibition opportunities as well as the challenges of motherhood and maintaining an art practice. There is often a degree of tension between women at different stages of their art careers as well as with regards to the choices made around family, friends, and community. Intersectional issues (gender, race, age, class, etc.) and their resulting relations of domination further complicate the already challenging experience of being a working artist. Because of this, artistic friendships among women possess their own enriching forms of antagonisms, defiance, and sociality.

While artistic friendships certainly involve a measure of intimacy and vulnerability, they are not exclusively private affairs. As one succeeds as an artist, conversations occur increasingly in public, as panel discussions, as artist interviews, and with colleagues involved in group critiques where, particularly in group critiques, there are opportunities to exchange perspectives, exercise discernment and evaluation, and hear how someone thinks about work and responds to aesthetic issues and objects. Specific qualities and directions of associative thinking are revealed in critique that can be quite inspirational. Dialogue with work increasingly happens in public even as it is filtered through specific codes and behaviors. These discussions and events move towards the performative, whereby we perform and

construct our identities in public, in front of each other through our actions, behaviours, and gestures. Indeed, in his work on friendship, Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: "Treat your friend as a spectacle."²⁷ Like art itself, public encounters and their larger cultural significance might be described as a form of artistic friendship where individual engagement is determined by the context in which it occurs.

There is friendship in general and friendship in the singular. Both are constituted by familiarity, fidelity, and a sense of the other as a profound presence and, simultaneously, an infinite distance in relation. I am intrigued by both the harmonious and the inharmonious exchanges that develop between two like-minded artists, the inevitable discoveries, anxieties, and tensions that arise when ambition meets creative vision, where congruencies and antagonisms nourish the imagination and, along the way, build lasting allegiances. It is only through experience, through its presence and process, that we can begin to appreciate what it means to be in an artistic friendship as it is constituted by individual sensibilities and their affects. What is integral is the sharing of time, conversation, influences, inspiration, advice for problems encountered, concern for partners, children, parents, etc., and of course, for works in progress. Like art, friendship is an activity, a practice of care and generosity. In the sharing of something dear to us we may wish for generative critique in the form of thoughtful comments and trusting affection. On a deep and intuitive level we want our friend to open up a world to us, to shed light on our own creative process that will somehow reveal itself in new and unimaginable ways. Whether we produce artistic artifacts to satisfy our own inspiration or to be in dialogue with larger conversations, the process is more joyfully realized with a friend or two in hand.

Randy Lee Cutler

Endnotes

¹Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume 2: 1934–1939*, Ed. Gunther Stuhlmann. (NY: Swallow Press, 1967), 193.

²Studies such as editors' Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle De Courtivron's *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnership* (NY: Thames and Hudson, 1993) and Vera John-Steiner's *Creative Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), explore artistic exchanges through the lens of amorous union or professional collaboration. Michael P. Farrell's *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) focuses on group dynamics or dyads within a larger coterie. Surprisingly there is nothing written directly on the subject of friendship and artistic practice.

- ³One could add to the list Ovid, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Francis, Descartes, Pascal, C.S. Lewis, etc.
- ⁴Giorgio Agamben, "The Friend," *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009): 25–38, 25.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Stereotypical examples of 'great' friendships include Coleridge and Wordsworth, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady.
- ⁷Agamben, 25.
- ⁸Michel De Montaigne, *On Friendship*, Trans. M.A. Screech, (NY: Penguin Books, 1993), 5.
- ⁹Ibid, 31.
- ¹⁰Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003), 195.
- ¹¹Maurice Blanchot, "Friendship," *Friendship*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997): 289–292, 291.
- ¹²Chantal Mouffe, Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph and Thomas, Keenan, "Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension," *Grey Room 2* (Winter, 2001): 98–125, 99.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Friendship," *Essays: First Series* (1841; NY: Vintage, 1990): 61–68, 67.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Avital Ronell, *On Friendship* (The European Graduate School, n.d.) Web. 11 March 2013. <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/avital-ronell/videos/on-friendship/>>
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- ¹⁸Dan Fox, "A Serious Business: What Does it Mean to be a Professional Artist," *Frieze* 121 (March 2009): n. pag., Web.
- ¹⁹Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.
- ²⁰Agamben, 5.
- ²¹In *Antigone's Claim* (NY: Columbia UP, 2000) Judith Butler points to this phrase coined by Kath Weston in *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- ²²Farrell, *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work*, 151.
- ²³Derrida, 194.
- ²⁴Bennett, xi.
- ²⁵D.J. Enright and David Rawlinson, eds., *The Oxford Book of Friendship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 349.
- ²⁶Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, Trans. George Collins, (London: Verso, 1997), 3.
- ²⁷Emerson, 67.