

Collaborators! Carlos M. Luis and Derek White

Working internationally, across generations, and in various media and genres, Carlos M. Luis and Derek White fuse visual and verbal texts into singular yet multifarious collage languages. They are co-authors of *O Vozque Pulp* and *ma(I)ze Tassel Retrazos*, a pair of volumes that hybridize the chap-book and art book formats, both published by White's Calamari Press.

Writer, artist, and curator Carlos M. Luis was born in Havana in 1932 and emigrated to the U.S. in 1962 after becoming disillusioned with the revolution. Among other curatorial and professorial duties, Luis directed the Cuban Museum of Art and Culture in Miami from 1979 through 1990, during which period the museum was bombed by anti-Castro militants for displaying the work of non-émigré Cubans (in a more deskbound act of censorship, the City of Miami refused to renew to the museum's lease in 1991, prompting a lawsuit won by the museum). Luis's own work, usually categorized as visual poetry or collage, has been displayed around the world and has appeared in numerous journals including *Word for Word*, *SleepingFish*, *Zunai* (Brazil), *TSE TSE* (Argentina), and *Manglar* (France). Recent publications include *Walls for Finnegans & Palimpsests for Beckett* (Anabasis Press) and *Dysfunctional Texts* (Luna Bisonte Press), as well as his two titles with Calamari.

Writer, scientist, and publisher Derek White was raised in Oregon, Mexico, and California. He studied math until he "realized it was a useless language without something to ground it to." He traveled widely, earned degrees in physics and philosophy, and finally settled in New York City where he works for Comedy Central by day and publishes books, chapbooks, and the journal *SleepingFish* under the Calamari imprint by night. His own writing has been published in *Denver Quarterly*, *Double Room*, *elimae*, and many other venues.

-Joyelle McSweeney

Joyelle McSweeney: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview! Let's begin with a simple question: Where are you right now?

Derek White Right now I am on the 7th floor of a building in the Lower East Side of Manhattan that used to be the building that housed **Guss' Pickles**. I am standing at my desk half-answering

my email and half-watching college basketball (my team, Arizona, just lost).

Carlos M. Luis: Right now I am sitting in front of my computer trying to answer your questions. I live in Miami (a city I don't particularly like) in a townhouse with my wife Martha.

White: And can you give us a visual as to where you are?

McSweeney: I am writing from a little house in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on the edge of the student (i.e., football, beer, and SUV) district. You can see the stadium from here. We are in our second flowering and well into spring. Hopefully the ants that live in my study won't resurface for another few weeks, however. My study is a wood-paneled converted porch that looks like it should have taxidermied fish on the walls. Instead, it has the following images printed off the Internet: St. Therese dressed as Joan of Arc; Picasso's costumes from "Parade"; and a frontispiece to **Blaise Cendrars's** "End of the World as Filmed by the Angel of Notre Dame." Also a seismographic printout from the eruption of **Mount St. Helens.**

Second question: How did you two come to collaborate?

White: Carlos might remember better than me, but I think he had submitted some work for the very first ***SleepingFish***. I liked it and asked for more, and he sent me an envelope with some 30 or 40 of his images. They inspired me to write the short texts that became *O, Vozque Pulp*. That was so much fun that we did it again with the more recent *ma(I)ze Tassel Retrazos*. We've only met once in person, and that was when I went down to Miami for a visual poetry show that he was curating.

Luis: I don't recall how we began our collab. Probably it had to do with the Spidertangle net [a website and listserv for visual poetics—ed.]. I sent him a collaboration for his magazine *SleepingFish* and we have been exchanging collaborations ever since. The first were a few drawings I made in Aix en Provence that Derek liked and included in our first book. And the second with a number of collages that he used for our second collab:

Tazel. . . etc. (I haven't been able to memorize the titles well). I met Derek and Jessica in Miami during their visit for a Vizpo show I curated at the Durban Segnini Gallery here in Miami, and liked them not only as artists but also as wonderful human beings.

McSweeney: What genres does each of you work in? Do you think of collaboration as a kind of genre? Does it require a different action of mind, or different technique? What defines a genre? Does genre exist?

White: If somebody out there believes genres exist, then genres exist (to those people anyway). There's no arguing that. I myself don't like to think about genre but more about process or realization. If you work specifically towards a genre, to me that is not really creating art but craft. Each time I create a new piece, I like to think of it as a unique object or meme that could be fulfilled using fiction or visual constructs, or whatever visual, textual, aural, tactile, or other sensory elements you wish to incorporate. Collaborating takes this further by further isolating the object from the creators. It seems to me only Americans or maybe Europeans have such an engrained concept of art needing to belong to an artist. In other places I have been, like Indonesia or Peru, I have noticed that artists will often collaborate on a work, casually picking up where someone left off, and not feeling a need to sign one's name to it (granted in many cases these types of art can usually be qualified as crafts). In an ideal world, these objects exist on their own and just happen to be created or morphed by so-and-so, or so-and-so and so-and-so (whether they know it or not). And these objects become "art" upon perception. We as "artists," or writers, whether we collaborate or not, or whether we are fulfilling a specific genre, are here merely to realize these objects to their full true potential. We are merely transitory slaves to these objects or "selfish memes."

Luis: Genre is one of those catchwords that postmodern critics love to use and doesn't really mean much to me. Therefore I have no idea (or for that matter care) in what genre I work. Insofar as working in collaboration: **Lautréamont** used to say that poetry should be made by all and not by one. I believe in

the interaction between poets and artists providing that there is a language in common that could be adapted as a sort of "collage" between the collaborators. I believe that Derek and I have just done exactly that.

P.S. I like your decoration, Joyelle—a sort of grand collage also. "Parade" (and all **Satie**) has always influenced me, and also Blaise Cendrars's poetry of his cubist epoch. Your choice is a good example of collaborative work without falling into any kind of canon.

McSweeney: I would like to know more about this collage language that exists between collaborators. Can you two describe your collaborative process? Is a new collage invented for each new project, or do collaborators develop a distinctive medium for use across projects?

White: I'm not sure I would call the collaborations that Carlos and I have done collages, though we both have done collage collaborations—I think Carlos probably more than me. When I think of collage I think of gluing and combining unrelated elements, usually on the same page. Our collaborations have been less interactive and more associative or interpretative, keeping the visual and textual elements separated—though it appears that "collaboration" and "collage" share a same root, so maybe as a whole you could treat an entire book as a "collage." I have treated Carlos's works as sort of Rorschach blots or chance-operations (à la **Cage**) that induce thoughts or memories to facilitate stories—that's how it has worked in the past anyway. Which is not to say that's how it would work were we to collaborate again, or with other collaborations we both have done or will do. I think each time it is a different process and necessarily should be.

Luis: Actually, our process of collaboration had to do more, I believe, with what a poet friend of mine, **José Lezama Lima**, used to call *el súbito*, or something that occurs suddenly and illuminates at the same time. Derek saw my drawings first and next my collages and suddenly (I think) was illuminated in a creative way: he began, then, to write around

my images his poetical prose. Once it was done, the collage or maybe the bricolage between both emerged as one work. Collage is for me the substance of mostly everything I create. But we must distinguish between the collage dear to the Surrealists (as invented first by **Max Ernst**) as the creation of a new scenario by pasting together distant realities (that was Lautréamont's first definition and next **Pierre Reverdy**'s idea of the poetical image) and the second kind of collage—the papier collé used by the Cubists and many Dadaists, i.e. **Schwitters**'s Merz, etc. Those were used by me in my collaboration with Derek.

White: Question back at you: in your new online quarterly, *Action, Yes*, you call poems by Aase Berg translated by Johannes Göransson and with images by Tom Benson "collages"—did you make that distinction and marriage of elements, and would you as an editor, consider yourself a "collage artist"? And in general, even if editors do not contribute content to a literary or arts magazine, should they be considered collage artists by virtue of the art and writing they choose to combine and the order in which they combine and present it?

McSweeney: Regarding the Berg collages in *Action, Yes*: the term is used to refer most immediately to Benson's collages—he created them, I believe, in response to Berg's poems. To my mind, the visual collages are both a reading and rewriting of Aase's work. The same may be said of Johannes's translations, of course, and all three texts together function as a collage, too (through the medium of our website, designed by John Dermot Woods—collaboration on top of collaboration!). I do think that the editorial function is one of collage, because hopefully the finished journal also has the same tension of unity/disunity found in most visual collage. We would not want things to feel too 'of a piece,' but the design prevents us from reading the contents of the site as entirely random.... Also, as you can tell from my switch to the first person plural in the last sentence, editorial process for us is also a collage—John, Johannes, and I collaborate to solicit the material, though John Woods's interface is a rewriting of the journal's contents in a way far different from

(and superior to) what Johannes and I could or would have envisioned for the whole (because we don't have his web-design skills or vision).

Maybe the task of building *Action, Yes* is like building Schwitters's **Merzbau**!

I'd like to turn Derek's questioning about editorial work as collage back to you two. Derek, it seems like the variety of editorial/publishing work you do also amounts to a kind of collage. Is that how you experience it? How do you reconcile your publishing and writing selves, or is there any need to for such a reconciliation? How do the variety of media you work in affect your sense of working in collage?

And Carlos: Does the act of exhibiting your work amount to a kind of collage? It seems to me that an exhibit space allows work to be viewed in a deterministic, usually serial construct that amounts to an interpretation of the individual pieces.... Is a work changed when it is exhibited? Is a piece changed when it is published, as in the Calamari books, or in a gallery program?

Luis: No, I don't think that my works, when exhibited, amount to a collage. It is true that once placed on a wall, in a certain sequence, the "reading" of them could be construed as one collage made of different works. Especially if one works (like I do) in series. What changes is the nature of the work once the work becomes part of the market and its speculations. Today the price of the works of art that are considered on the cutting edge" by the art critics, museums, galleries and auction houses, confuses the works' real value (by transforming them into merchandise) and thus their very nature as works of art.

White: I guess I experience editorial work as a need for content, for creative sensory information. If the literary or arts spaces fulfilled me with compelling information of the type I was looking for, then perhaps I wouldn't feel the need to write or publish. But when I look around, especially in the wake of the journal **3rd Bed**'s demise, there is an urgent need to fill these niches and niches that have not even been conceived, to keep pushing

things forward. If I find it in someone else, I'll publish it, otherwise I will try to create it myself, or collaborate. As an editor, you know when you find something good because it makes you bow down and abandon everything you are doing—because you know it's been done better than you could ever do it. That leads to the compulsion to publish it so others can experience that same sense of discovery. If you have an idea or vision in your head of what you are looking for and can't find it, then there is the compulsion to create it, to get it down on paper. My problem as a publisher and an editor (and one with a fulltime job in a unrelated field) is that I am finding less and less time to create my own art (let alone read all the books I want to read, travel to all the places I want to go, etc.). As for the different media types, for me that is related to the limits of expression. Sometimes words can show it all, other times—as the saying goes—a picture tells a thousand words. Other times it feels like neither is doing quite enough on its own and so needs some help, a different angle. And this is only touching on the visual and textual. You could go on and on about music, sculpture, food, film, and other media and multimedia.

Okay, so a question back to you, as one of the critical voices behind ***The Constant Critic*** website and writer of insightful and creative book reviews: how does the review process fit in to all of this? Can reviewers in a sense act as collaboration partners with writers in furthering their causes, in promoting their ideas? Or, in the case of a negative review, collaborate by exposing a piece of writing's true worth? Can a review add substance to the body of that work being reviewed, and can a review be considered a work of art in itself? And one last question about reviews (coming from someone with a background in the sciences)—can a literary review ever be purely objective?

McSweeney: To answer your question, Derek, while we are all workers in and for the arts, it would probably be stretching it to say that a reviewer collaborates with an author. But I have begun to think it's okay to think of a review as an opportunity to advocate for an author, a press, a group, or a school of poetry that I want people to know (more) about. I've occasionally also used a negative review to spotlight an aesthetic or ethical move

in someone's work I disagree with. I don't expect that person's work to change in response (I'm not sure I'd want that kind of power, either!), but I do want to start a conversation among writers about whether my claims are valid, whether I'm asking the right questions, whether the aesthetic or ethical problem I point out is something we poets and artists should be thinking about. I do think a review can enrich a reading experience for a subsequent reader of the text in question, because I think some people do need frames to help them into certain texts. Once inside they can disregard my reading and make of the text whatever they want. It could also be the case that a review would enrich a reading of a text by placing it in communication with other texts that even the author might not have thought of. Finally, there is SURELY no such thing as an objective review in the arts—is there any such thing as an objective review in science? I worked at the *Annals of Otolaryngology* for a year, sending out papers for peer review. Our reviewers were brilliant and conscientious, but presumably there's a reason we seek out at least three of them.

More and more I am thinking that the New Critical rhetoric of objectivity has been a real blow to poetry writing, reception, and pedagogy. This attitude is reflected everywhere, from the structure of poetry workshops to the call for "objective" reviews to the requirement that poetry be apolitical lest it lose its timelessness and attach to a particular temporality. Poetry just gets more and more exciting when it's read in historical or political or aesthetic context, and there are always infinite contexts in which it can be placed. A contextless review would not be objective, but it would be myopic. Objectivity in the arts is a red herring, or worse, a disingenuous dodge that keeps us from trying to grasp art's real implications in and impact on the world.

Your comment about art and the market, Carlos, reminds me of Derek's earlier statement about the 'ideal situation' for art as deriving from a non-authorial, workshop, or group-oriented model. What is the ideal social/political/economical situation for art? What is the ideal social/political/economical situation for artists? Is the ideal situation for art the same as the ideal

situation for artists? Is the ideal situation for artists the same as for the rest of mankind? Think big—or is it bad to think this big?

Luis: Your question requires a critique in depth of the social/economical conditions we are living in. I am not an expert in these matters, and even less of an expert in predicting what should be the ideal conditions for the art and the artists in the future. As an old socialist, I guess that I lean towards a more radical change of conditions where the artists could express themselves without the burden of being controlled by the market. But how can we change all that? Everything points to an increasing control from the art merchants and a more conscious complicity of the artists and critics in this process. This trend began during the Renaissance but has become an acceptable way of life in our times.

Again, how to change all that? I am pessimistic about any changes. First of all, the instruments of change, the so called "left," is in disarray in most parts of the world and almost nonexistent in the USA. The duty of the left has been always to represent the critical conscience of its time. In that sense the left should be against the forces in power including the forces that manipulate the art market. In fact we shouldn't be talking about an "art market" at all, since art and the market represent contradicting values. The market is about price and art is about values. But the former has managed to identify one with the other. One good example is the Art Basel. All you hear from them is the thousands of dollars paid by a snob for a work by a nominated "cutting edge" artist that the art galleries, museums, etc., have destined to be the star of the show. The almighty dollar produces, then, the miracle of transforming a work of art into a simple piece of merchandise.

Frankly I don't see how we can stop that trend in the foreseeable future, barring of course and unforeseeable revolution....

If I had to give a piece of advice to all the artists my one and only would be: find another job to make a living and become Sunday painters, or whatever you wish to be.

McSweeney: I'll just ask you this final question: What question does each of you have for the other?

Luis: Derek, given the scope of the computer revolution and all its future ramifications, what role, if any, do you believe that poetry has in these changes? Taking into consideration that poetry goes far beyond the simple written word.

White: That's a good question that I will first attempt to answer in reverse (how computers have influenced "poetry" or art). To me computers are great tool of research, discovery and propagation. Google is the best thing since sliced bread. The information that is at our fingertips would have been inconceivable at the time I graduated from high school (in the mid 80s). And its potential as a marketing tool and means to propagate information is astounding. In the case of *SleepingFish*, I printed out 250 copies of the last issue, most of which I gave away or are probably gathering dust on bookstore shelves. On the other hand, the *SleepingFish* website receives on average about 350 unique visitors per day. But I think we are all aware of the impact of the Internet and I don't think that answers the question you're asking, except to point out that we are living in a time where there is no shortage of information and ideas and anyone can call him- or herself "a poet." I guess "poetry" or art's ramification in this is as a filter. I hate to always revert back to biological or mimetic metaphors, but that's how I tend to think of things, consciously or not. I don't think anybody has the authority to dictate what's art and what's not art or poetry, just like I would treat all organisms with **DNA** as life that should be revered equally. Poetry is the capsule that shrouds ideas. In order to be effective and propagate in this climate of information overload, these poetic capsules have to be engaging and compelling to the subjects reading or viewing them, otherwise the encapsulated idea or concept of it will never survive. Poetry is the configuration of feathers on a bird in a massive flock of birds that another bird singles out as a mate even if it is not consciously sure why.

Okay, here's my question for Carlos. In your creations such as *Traptexts* [a chapbook published by eIghT pAgE press—ed.] you

have created your own veritable lexicon, rife with symbols, visual icons, and characters, some borrowed from familiar or foreign languages, others seemingly made up from scratch. In creating works such as this, what is most important to you—how that language looks on the page, how that language sounds if read out loud or performed, what the combination of elements indirectly invokes, or what the language directly communicates? How important is legibility or accessibility to you, both in creating and reading?

Luis: The word is, let's not forget it, primarily sound, a sound that eventually "received" a meaning. Language, therefore, is composed first by sounds (music) and signs (the written word). To me, it's a question of going back to the basics by using the principle of bricolage and creating a combination of all sorts of signs, sounds, and words—some invented, others from different languages. Maybe now they don't have any meaning but eventually those texts of mine (I prefer to call them texts and not poems since poetry is too loaded with romantic conceptions) will, in turn, "receive" meanings. By then who knows what new devices the poets will have at their disposal? Maybe language will be a thing of the past, or maybe we will return to the purity of sound. What the occultists called "the language of the birds." ❖