

# A beautiful question to elicit collective creation

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## Keywords

creative autonomy, collective creation, collaborative creation, beautiful questions

## Introduction

### Questions and creativity

"To come to grips with creativity, I must ask creative, adventurous questions - the kind which, in all likelihood, cannot be answered."

- Lukas Foss

One of the methods of forming and developing creativity is to ask good questions. We also have to trust that we are open to being surprised by the outcome of such questions, as Suleimani suggests in the following extract.

"In order to manifest creativity, we have to believe that we are created to play our parts in changing the world around us, then we will see that how that outcome is surprising."

- Suleimani, 2008

David Cooperrider, who developed a theory of appreciative inquiry, asserts:

"We live in the world our questions create".

What we choose to answer will get our attention. Our attention will create our experience. The mere act of asking questions is one of creation.

Stuart Firestein, in his book *Ignorance: How it drives science*, argues to use questions as a means of navigating through its new discoveries.

“One good question can give rise to several layers of answers, can inspire decades-long searches for solutions, can generate whole new fields of inquiry, and can prompt changes in entrenched thinking. Answer, on the other hand, often end the process.”

One of the most powerful forces for tapping and honing your creativity is inquiry. Questions stem from intellectual curiosity, which in turn fuel creativity. Curiosity compels us to intentionally frame questions that lead to more unanswered questions, instead of definitive answers. The creative process starts when there's a great question hanging in the air.

The neurologist and author Ken Heilman, a leading expert on creative activity in the brain, acknowledges that research on what's happening in the brain when we ask questions, has been scant. However, there has been significant neurological study of divergent thinking – the mental process of trying to come up with alternative ideas, a crucial element in the creative process. Heilman notes:

“Since divergent thinking is about saying, ‘Hey, what if I think differently about this?’ it's actually a form of asking questions.”

(Berger, 2014)

Good questioning triggers divergent thinking. It taps imagination and often triggers random association of ideas.

### Questions and the examined life

“I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

- Maria Rainer Rilke, 1903

Good questions – especially beautiful questions, which I discuss in greater detail shortly - can also serve as an invitation to live an examined life, as Socrates enjoined\* and urged by Rilke in the quote above. We are all storytellers – we make stories to make sense of our lives. When we are living an examined life, we live a transparent life. We are allowing ourselves to open up to examination, by understanding their underlying assumptions about ourselves, and about the world around us. When implicit, unstated knowledge becomes explicit (clearly expressed) it can be then be questioned, refined and honed.

## What makes a question beautiful?

"Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

- E. E. Cummings

The English poet David Whyte has said that:

"There is an art to asking the beautiful question."

A beautiful question is an ambitious question that triggers potent inquiry and has the power to shift the way we perceive or think about something. It is a question we live and practice every day. It deeply resonates and opens us to new possibilities aligned with our deepest longings and truths.

Beautiful questions are perpetual. Once they are answered, the inquiry remains, as we continue to shape our thinking. They are the very kind of questions that ensure that inquiry remains the focal point. They have no end, only the promise of ongoing possibility. The questions trump the answer.

Beautiful questions shape beautiful minds. They elevate our thinking and knowledge. They make us see in different ways. They make us feel vulnerable and require courage to answer. The beautiful questions are the hard questions many of us are afraid to ask.

"The ability to ask beautiful questions, often in very unbeautiful moments, is one of the great disciplines of a human life. And a beautiful question starts to shape your identity as much by asking it, as it does by having it answered. You just have to keep asking. And before you know it, you will find yourself actually shaping a different life, meeting different people, finding conversations that are leading you in those directions that you wouldn't even have seen before."

-David Whyte

## A beautiful question to elicit the act of creation

The question that keeps resurfacing for me – and for humankind -, is 'What does it mean to be human?'

"The question of what it means to be human is always a question of elasticity of being. It's never an arrival point."

- Maria Popova, 2015

I used this question to give purpose to the act of a (collective) creation. As part of an Advanced Diploma in Facilitating Creative Collaboration, I conceived a SELP (Self Expression Leadership Project), where I was to design and facilitate a creative collaboration. In defining my project, I was driven by two considerations.

**First**, I was taking it as an opportunity to have others join me in my exploration of a beautiful question. I hoped that using a beautiful question would instil a belief with the contributors that all of them have a part to play in making sense and meaning of the world around them.

**Second**, I wanted to safeguard the uniqueness of multiple perspectives. We each have a unique view on life and a distinctive way of expressing ourselves - how we translate our beliefs, values, thoughts and emotions into communication. In striving to speak a common language to be understood and be inclusive, I feel this multitude of unique perspectives and experiences is overlooked or sometimes even lost on us.

"If you want a beautiful life, start asking beautiful questions."

- David Whyte

With this in mind, the idea for my project took shape: to crowdsource and curate multiple views in answer to a beautiful question – what does it mean to be human - and have people answer the question through the lens of their unique experience, identity or discipline. I named it 'Ecce Homo' ('Behold the man').

"The best art and writing is almost like an assignment; it is so vibrant that you feel compelled to make something in response. Suddenly it is clear what you have to do. For a brief moment it seems wonderfully easy to live and love and create breathtaking things."

- learningtoloveyoumore.com

Centuries worth of scientific thought, artistic tradition and spiritual practice have attempted to answer this most fundamental question about our existence. And yet the diversity of views and opinions is so grand it has made that answer remarkably elusive. (Popova). While I don't necessarily believe such an "answer" — singular and conclusive by definition — even exists, I want to make an effort to understand the wholeness of a human being by bringing together multiple personal points of views and experiences.

How we see ourselves is the foundation for our values, our choices, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with nature. In this age where artificial intelligence is finding its way into our daily lives, the question seems more pertinent than ever.

## Ecce Homo

### A brief description

My SELP was to crowdsource and curate multiple views in answer to a beautiful question "What it means to be human". People were asked to answer the question through the lens of their unique experience, identity, role or discipline/profession and in a format of their own choice.



### PART 1: ANSWER

Individually answer the question "What does it mean to be human?"

- Through the lens of your unique experience, role, identity or profession (*content*)
- In a *format* of your own choice

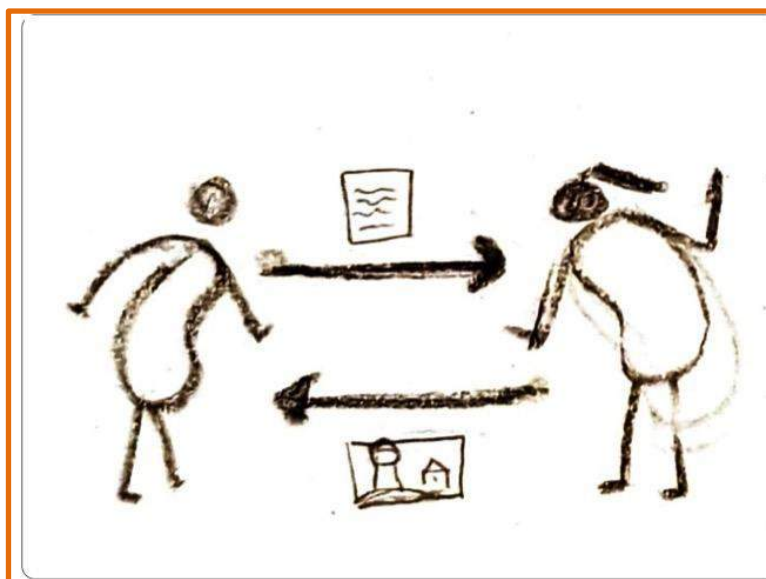
### The aim of the project

I wanted to offer people the space to critically examine the assumptions of themselves and others regarding what it means to be human and live the examined life.

### PART 2: RESPOND

In pairs, exchange answers and respond to each other's work:

- How does it make you feel?
- What is your body sensing? (physical sensations)
- What are you thinking?
- What did you learn?
- What question(s) come up?



### The contributors

In phases 1 and 2, 31 people contributed to the project. They came from various walks of life, spanned 6 continents and 16 nationalities, and ranged in age from 7 to 77. In phase 2, 24 more people got involved: 11 twelve-year olds and 12 fifteen-year olds and their teacher. In total, 55 people were involved.



### PHASE 3: SHARE

- Show all the answers to a group of children/teenagers
- Have them identify themes, patterns and come to insights



André Carrens: cyanotype (for Ecce Homo)



## Collaborative creation in art

"In a general sense, collaborative creation refers to a creation process within which a plurality of persons engage in the production of intellectual or informational content by sharing and combining their creative and informational resources, skills, and knowledge."

- Camarinha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2006

The collaborative creation process holds a position of significance within mankind's cultural creation narrative. It is embedded within our folkloric tradition of storytelling and is also visible in experimental and populist artistic movements. For example, experimental art movements such as Dadaism, Neo-Dadaism, surrealism and more populist movements such as the pop-art movement extensively use the collaborative creation process. What can we learn from the world of art about collaborative creation?

Dadaists, a loose band of avant-garde modernists in the prelude to World War, claimed to believe that the value of art did not lie in the actual work being produced, but in the process and collaboration instead; the idea of collaboration was to create and bring new visions of the world.

One of the most prominent and historical collaborations throughout Dadaism was the creation of [The Cabaret Voltaire](#), a nightclub in Zurich, Switzerland founded by Hugo Ball and his companion Emmy Hennings on February 5, 1916. The nightclub was to act as a cabaret for artistic and political purposes.

The press release on 2 February 1916 announcing the opening of the club reads:

The Cabaret Voltaire. Under this name a group of young artists and writers has formed with the object of becoming a center for artistic entertainment. In principle, the Cabaret will be run by artists, permanent guests, who, following their daily reunions, will give musical or literary performances. Young Zürich artists, of all tendencies, are invited to join us with suggestions and proposals.

There are so many examples throughout art history that show us the uniqueness of collaborative creations that came out from artistic partnerships. Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Breughel the Elder, the two most important painters in Antwerp in the early 17th century, executed about two dozen paintings together between 1598 and Breughel's death in 1625. Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore who consciously decided to become one single artist and went on to create a new type of art. The collaboration between Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg birthed pop-art. Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray published a collaborative work consisting of a photograph of Duchamp's iconic work 'The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even or The Large Glass' covered in dust along with a brief poetic text.

A more contemporary example is '[This Exquisite Forest](#)', an online collaborative animation project. From 2012 - 2014, visitors to this site could use an online drawing tool to create a short animation. Other visitors

could then build off of that animation, resulting in branching, ever-evolving narratives resembling trees. The project was conceived by Chris Milk and Aaron Koblin (2012-2014) and produced by the Google Data Arts Team and Tate Modern.

Does artistic collaboration always work? Is creativity nurtured or thwarted when people collaborate?

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol collaborated on a number of paintings between 1983 and 1985. Keith Haring said enthusiastically:

"[The Collaboration Paintings are] a physical conversation happening in paint instead of words. The sense of humor, the snide remarks, the profound realizations, the simple chit-chat all happened with paint and brushes."

Critics, however, were not as enthusiastic about the work. One commentator, after seeing the 1985 show at which the Basquiat-and-Warhol's paintings were publicly exhibited for the first time, griped, "Everything . . . is infused with banality. Who is using whom here?"

### **A shadow side of creative collaboration?**

Susan Cain (2012) writes in her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*.

"Being around other artists [often] stimulates idea-generation. It's part of the reason Andy Warhol created his Factory."

"However," she continues, "Checking too often with someone else—pausing for feedback with each bit of output—can inhibit or confuse us. We can lose our natural trajectory, intuition, or instinctual aim."

Other people's reactions, if not enthusiastic, can all too easily cause an artist to become inhibited or demoralized. As Cain notes, exposure to other people's reactions can be so obfuscatory that we lose hold of our own convictions and can no longer see our own work clearly.

When we're in a group, inevitably, group dynamics will take over. A few of them can be pretty counterproductive to the end goal of coming up with a bunch of creative ideas.

A series of studies by Professors Michael Diehl, Wolfgang Stroebe (1987), Paul Paus (1993), and others, found that people self-censor many of their most creative ideas in group brainstorming sessions for fear of being judged negatively by others. When the scientists told groups that their ideas would be judged by their peers, they came up with significantly fewer and less novel ideas than groups that were told they would be evaluated by anonymous judges.

We worry about what other people think of us. The theory of evaluation apprehension, proposed by Nickolas B. Cottrell in 1972, suggests that group settings can impair our performance over the fear of being judged. As a result, we can often play too nice to others to avoid being critiqued harshly in return. That makes for nice and polite workplace dynamics but can be a lot less useful when working ideas in a creative session.



Then there is also the phenomenon of production blocking. Group members have to listen attentively to other people's ideas, which leaves them with less mental energy to think of their own ideas. When people work together, their ideas tend to converge. In contrast, when people work alone, they tend to diverge in their thinking, because everyone takes a slightly different path to thinking about the problem.

Another series of studies by Professor Eric Rietzschel and colleagues (2010) show that when groups interactively ranked their "best" ideas, they chose ideas that were less original than the average of the ideas produced, and more feasible than the average of the ideas produced. In other words, people tended to weight "feasible" more highly than "original."

### **Solitude and creative autonomy**

"We overvalue the idea of collaboration," Cain argues. "I call this The New Groupthink—the idea that creativity and productivity come from an oddly gregarious place." She goes on to say, "Solitude is a crucial and underrated ingredient for creativity. From Darwin to Picasso to Dr. Seuss, our greatest thinkers have often worked in solitude." In physics, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, and James Clerk Maxwell, three of the greatest creative contributors, worked almost entirely alone. They profited from other people's ideas not in direct collaboration, but by reading research papers and books.

"My feeling is that as far as creativity is concerned, isolation is required...The presence of others can only inhibit this process, since creation is embarrassing. For every new good idea you have, there are a hundred, ten thousand foolish ones, which you naturally do not care to display."

- Isaac Asimov

### **So why does the idea of collaboration remain so entrenched?**

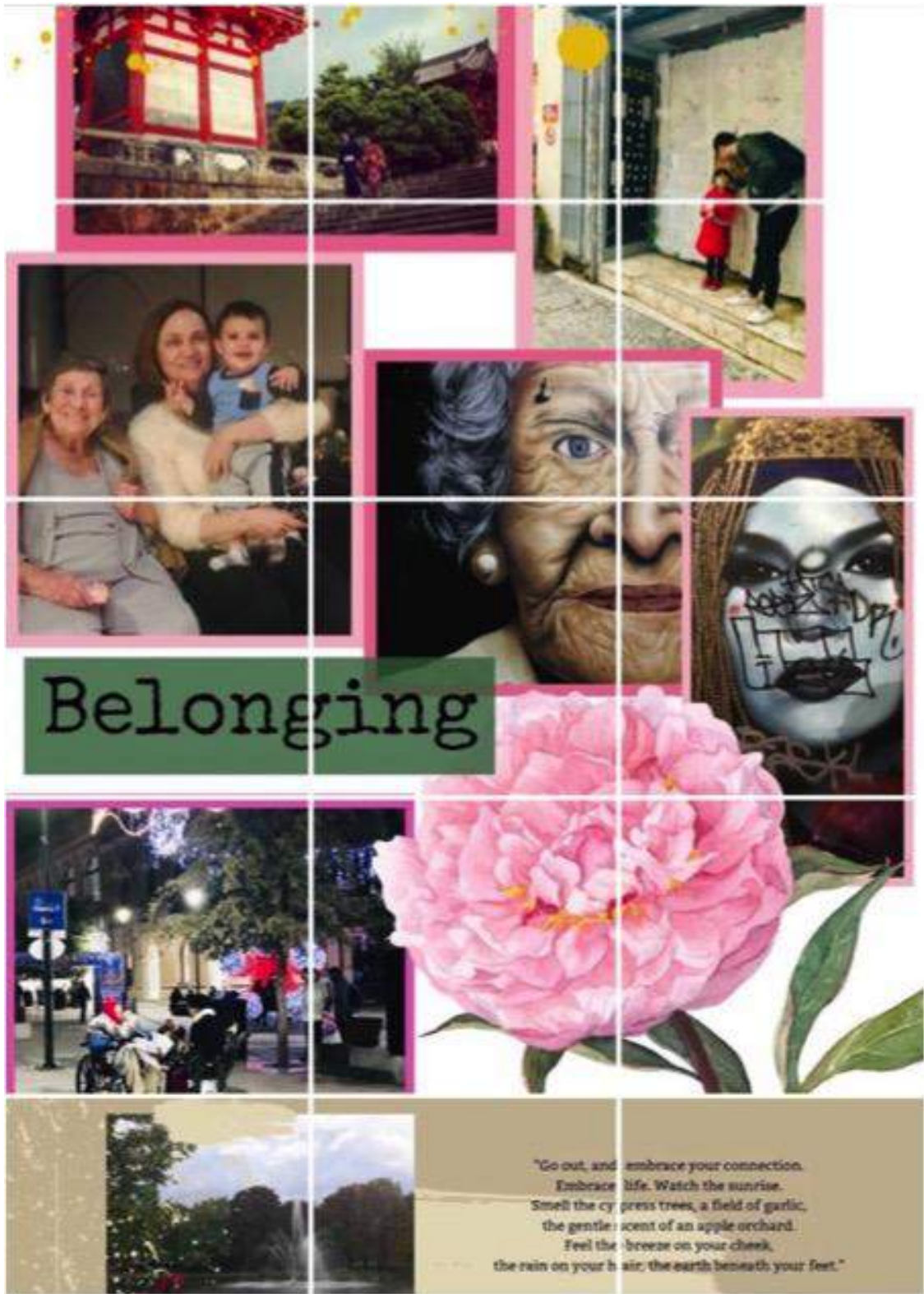
Maybe part of the reason collaboration has gained such prominence is because it can be so germinative in the world of business and commerce. Collaboration is useful because the product develops out of exchange.

The rise of the internet and advancements in digital technology have led to a re-assertion of collaborative creation as a prevalent model in the generation of cultural content. New technologies have allowed for new forms of collaborative creation such as crowd-sourcing, remixing and mash-ups, profiting from the possibilities for remote collaboration, where a plurality of persons interact and react with each other in order to give rise to creative expression.

### **Collaborative versus collective creation**

Sunil Mendis, a researcher in intellectual property law at the Sciences Po Law School in Paris, has done work around collaborative authorship in the context of POCC (Public Open Collaborative Creation). She sees collaborative creation as creation taking place through the contributions of a multiplicity of persons

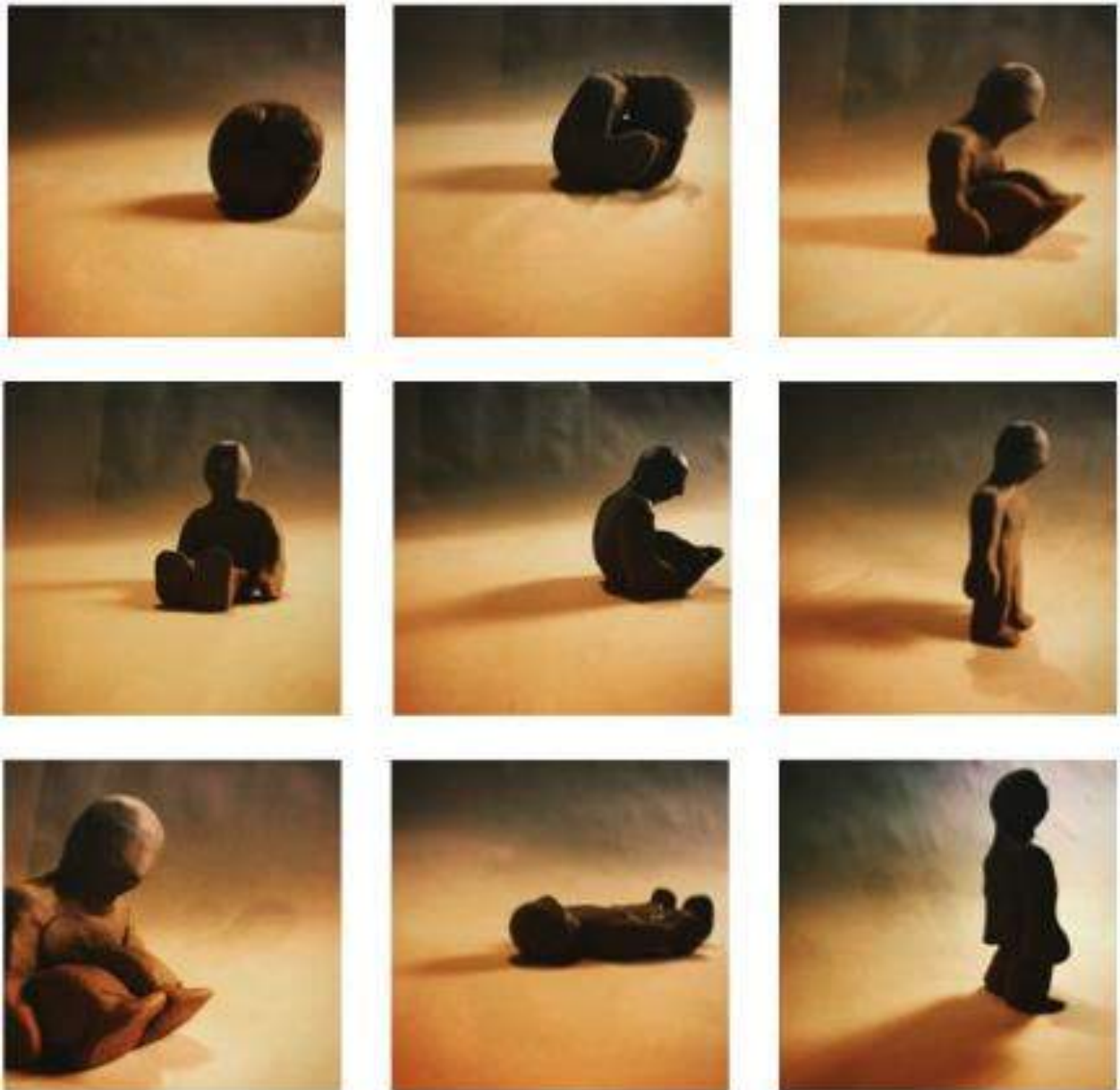
(contributors) under a model of sequential innovation and resulting in the production of a literary, artistic or scientific work which remains in a continuous state of change and development over an undefined period of time (2018). A well-known example of a “Public Open Collaborative Creation” is [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/).



Mayra Hurtado: Instagram posts (for Ecce Homo)

I have used a different process of collaborative creation to construct a cultural artefact. The individual contributions were stand-alone artefacts that would form a new artefact on a higher level, rather than additions or modifications to contributions made by each other within a sequential innovation process resulting (such as a Wikipedia article). My aim was to allow for individual creative expression.

It freed the contributors from the need to agree on and share a common design and a specific pre-determined creation goal or scheme. The fact that the collaborators were distanced both spatially as well as temporally along creation process made it even more difficult for them to share such a common design. They did not relate to the creative decision-making process, nor was there a possibility for discussion.



Sara Scott – clay figurine (for Ecce Homo)

In light of all of this, one could argue whether the Ecce Homo initiative was more a case of collective rather than collaborative creation. The collective creation process envisages the creation of a collective work through the compilation or arrangement of the creative contributions made by a multiplicity of authors, within a logical sequence.

The various contributors did not collaborate with each other within a common creative endeavour, but instead worked independently on their individual contributions. These contributions were later collated together to form a single collective work by a person - in this case, myself - to whom is usually attributed the "ownership" of the collective work (provided that the compilation and/or arrangement of the different contributions display sufficient originality in order to qualify him/her as an author/owner). As such, the absence of collaboration among the different authors within the creation process and the fact that these different contributions usually remain separate and distinct from each other, might prevent the Ecce Homo initiative from being considered a case of collaborative creation.

This resulted in a weak or even non-existent sense of community among contributors. This could be ascribed to the absence of a general discussion forum within which contributors are able to interact with each other outside of the creation process. Thus, interaction between contributors to Ecce Homo was limited to the act of creation itself (i.e., contributing reactive content to someone else's contribution).

"One can speak of a collaborative work if all collaborators work together under a "common inspiration" (also defined as a "spiritual intimacy") which enables them to work toward a common goal by means of a "creative concerted effort".

- Lucas, Lucas, & Lucas-Schloetter, 2012

Participation – which was on a voluntary basis - was not incentivized by any monetary reward, nor by the prospect of gaining peer-recognition, or being a part of a community. At the most the motivation stemmed from engaging in a socially valuable creation activity and/or a desire to live the examined life (an invitation to introspect). And this brings me back to the importance of the beautiful question to inspire and drive the collective creation.

I allowed for a lot of creative autonomy: the contributor's discretion to interpret the assignment freely (content) and choose their own means of expression (format). Each contributor had a high and equal degree of power and authority in determining the direction and outcome of his or her own creative endeavour. This gave them the freedom to exercise a high degree of creative autonomy within the creation process. I did observe that this resulted in a significant variance between contributions in terms of both effort and quality.

The chosen process allowed wide scope for experimentation and organic evolution. The absence of creation hierarchy and the creative autonomy enjoyed by contributors, compelled me to look at the facilitator role as one of a curator.



## My experimentation with collective creation

The project was carried out in three phases.

### Phase 1: Answering a beautiful question

In phase 1, contributors individually answered the question “What does it mean to be human?”. They were free to choose how (through which lens - content) they were answering the question. It could be within the context of their profession, discipline, “role/identity”, or their unique experience. The answer could be conceptual or grounded in reality.

They could also choose their own means of self-expression (format). This could be the written word in its various forms, a painting, a photograph, a dance choreography, a sculpture, a musical composition, a song, a cartoon, an equation, a movie etc. I encouraged them to be creative and authentic.

“When you put so much of yourself and your time into something, it’s hard to separate it from who you are.”

- Julia Rothman

### Phase 2: Responding to another creator’s work

In phase 2, each contributor was asked to respond to someone else’s work. I felt it was important that they not evaluate or judge, but rather share their genuine personal response from three angles: emotion, sensation and cognition.

There were still some instances where judgment came through. I think it was the lack of intimacy in the group – because of the chosen approach - that resulted in incidental absence of empathy.

### Phase 3: Sharing with young people and Identifying themes

In phase 3, all the individual artefacts came together. They were shown to groups of children/teens who identified unfolding themes and patterns and captured those through a co-created artwork. In this final stage of the project, there was an element of collaborative creation.

The children also interpreted the question to their own personal context, which resulted in a list of 42 new questions. As an afterthought I decided to pass on these questions to the people who contributed in phases 1 and 2 asking them to pick a question and give an ‘answer’, a personal view, a piece of advice or another question.



In addition, when the project was showcased in London, guests were also invited to pick a question to answer, and many did so. All of the answers were collected and given to the children.

At the end of the project, I asked the original contributors if going through the experience had any (transformational) impact on them. This is an excerpt of one of the answers I received.

My story is not The Life of Neil but is The Varied Tales of Neil in which innumerable narratives are interwoven creating a vibrant tapestry. When viewed as a whole at a distance it is a single work, but when viewed up close the individual threads support each other, they rely on and inform each other while remaining individual threads. Hence my Transformation.

...

To some extent or another, every story in which we are a character results in a change to who we are and who others are. Sometimes it is small - a single tiny thread misplaced in the tapestry of life. Sometimes it is defining - a large swath of color that makes or breaks the entire work. And a myriad of options in between and beyond. The real insight (atonement?)

is coming to realize this and living your life with a profound appreciation for the stiches that weave us together as a human race. Here I am reminded of David Foster Wallace's commencement address. Making the choice to go through life aware of the characters you are in countless stories and to respond to that realization by choosing to live as much as possible a life of giving yourself to those narratives is to live the fullest of lives.

- Neil Watson (contributor Ecce Homo)

## Envoi

Looking at all the answers I received to this beautiful question, I cannot help but wonder whether a – subconscious desire to reveal ourselves was at play. The question served as an invitation and triggered an act of creation.

The world presents itself to us as a question. Living the question(s) involves acts of creation. And hence we do, collectively, as a human species.

"It's very likely that the universe is really a kind of a question, rather than the answer to anything."

-Kevin Kelly (2018)



## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge **all the contributors to 'Ecce Homo'**. I am grateful for the generosity of their time and the effort they have kindly put into the project.

## Footnote

\* "The unexamined life is not worth living" is a famous dictum apparently uttered by Socrates at his trial for impiety and corrupting youth, for which he was subsequently sentenced to death, as described in *Plato's Apology* (38a5–6)

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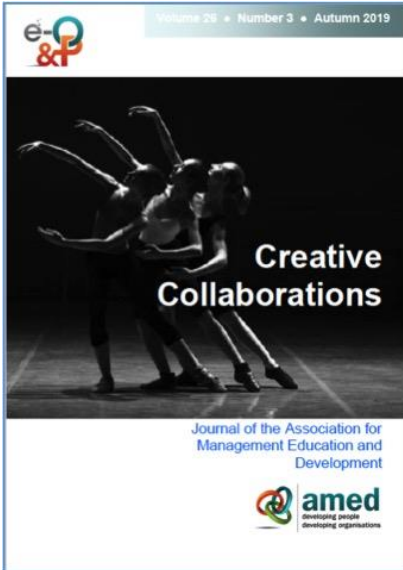
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Ling Sian is the founder of twyla, a company in learning design and facilitation. She is a leadership development facilitator, a High Performance Team Practitioner and certified in Advanced Facilitation of Creative Collaboration and the Deep democracy- The Lewis method.

She draws insights from different disciplines (neuroscience, deep democracy, art, psychology) and apply these in her learning design and facilitation. She loves to work with curious minds and hopes to bring more humanity into the workplace.

She loves taking long walks with her dog, takes a guilty pleasure in buying more books than she can ever read, and thinks the best way to explore a city is to get lost in its streets.

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