

Donald Saff

Art in Collaboration



DONALD SAFF: ART IN COLLABORATION



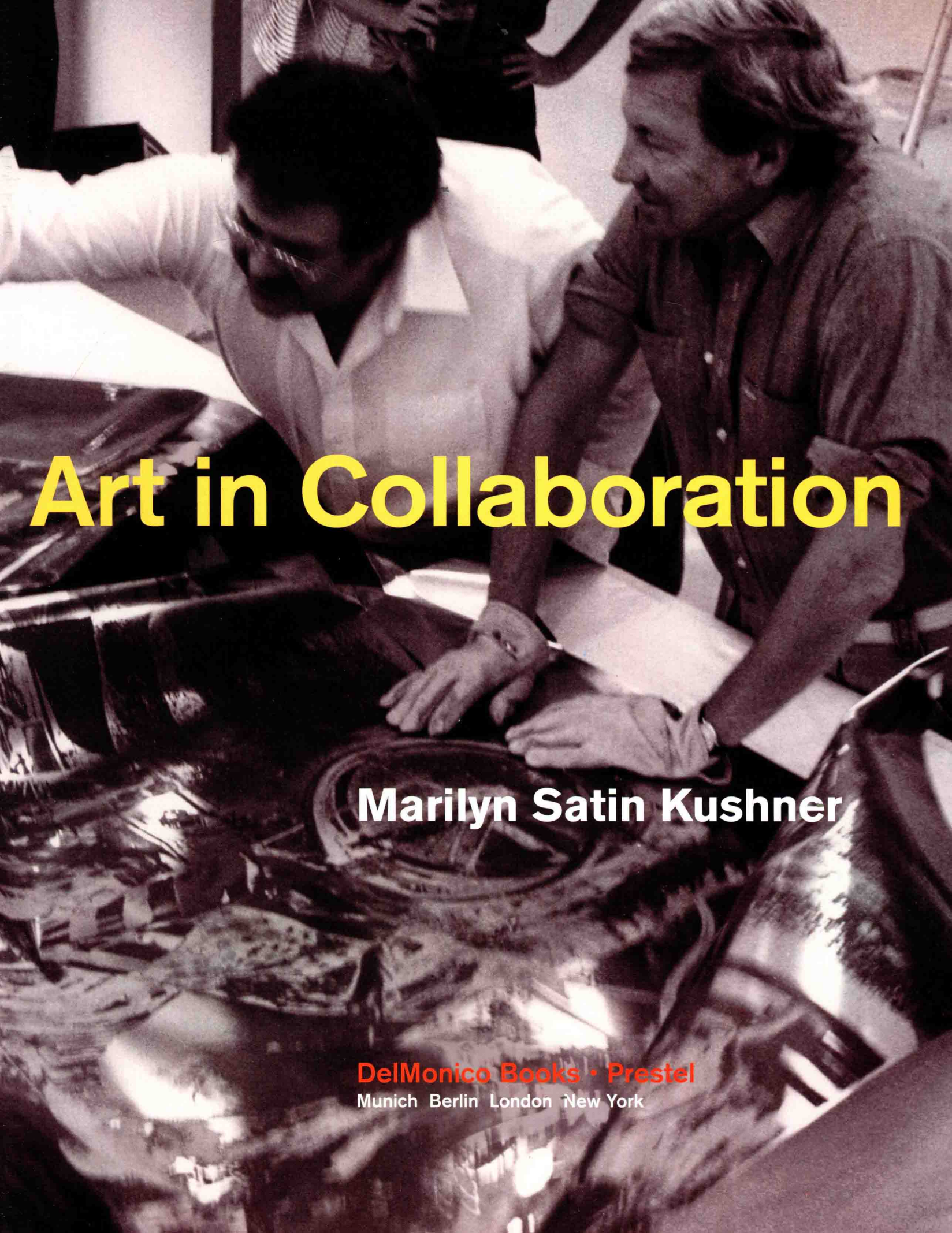
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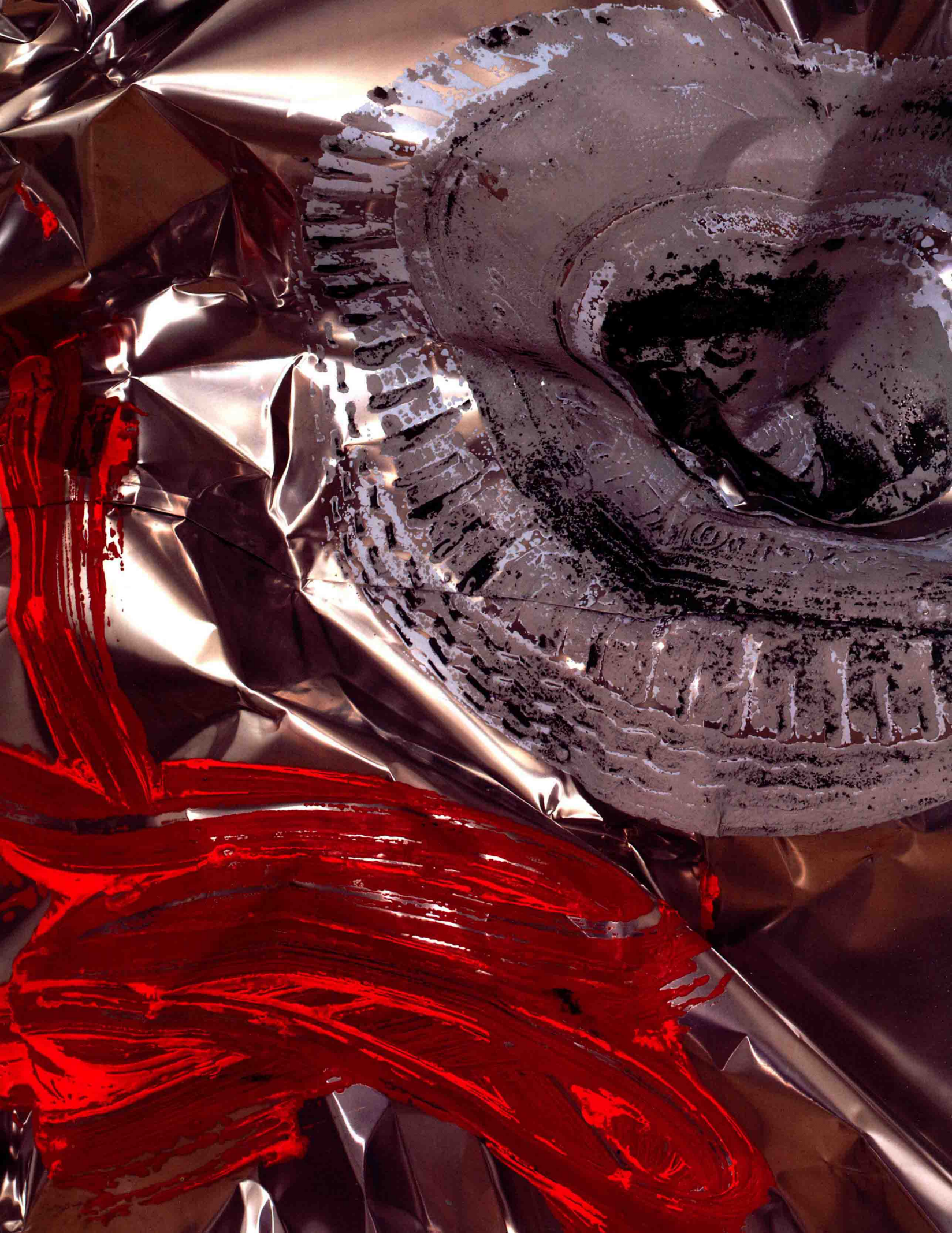


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Marilyn Satin Kushner

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AS THE PREMISE OF THIS BOOK MAINTAINS, great art is often a collaborative process. Writing a book such as this one is also a collaborative effort, and from its inception *Donald Saff: Art in Collaboration* has depended upon many people dedicated to seeing this publication reach its full potential.

The original concept began with Jack Cowart, Director of the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, who suggested exploring the role of collaboration in the arts in the late twentieth century as exemplified by Saff Tech Arts. The idea flowered one sunny afternoon in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden when Marc Mayer (now Director of the National Gallery of Canada), Donald Saff, and I met over lunch. We were convinced that this was a story that needed to be told, and I thank these individuals for their confidence in my ability to guide the project from that point to its realization.

Donald Saff opened his complete archives to me, and I was left free to explore anything about Saff Tech Arts in his possession. Don was always willing to work on this project, spending long hours and constantly giving of himself to ensure its success. Ruth Saff, his wife, was dedicated as well, offering advice, more memories, time, and editorial expertise. Susie Hennessy worked tirelessly and was ever-present with her assistance. Brenda Woodard offered indispensable editorial support, and I thank her for her time and professional efforts on behalf of the completion of this book. It would be an understatement to say that this would not have happened without the involvement of these four people. I acknowledge them not only for their participation, which assured the success of the project, but also for their friendship, something that will continue far beyond its completion. Indeed, the entire Saff family—Harvey, Edward, Stephen, and Jeffrey—were core players in Saff Tech Arts and offered me details key to my efforts. Others at Saff Tech Arts who merit special attention and thanks are George Holzer and Ken Elliott, who worked diligently with us in the Saff warehouse in Baltimore, the shop in Oxford, and anywhere else they were needed.

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Lastly, to speak to the artists and hear their firsthand accounts of these collaborations was particularly meaningful, and I am grateful to Jim Dine, the late Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, and James Turrell for their recollections. As with any partnering effort, without their input, this book would not have reached its full potential.

INTRODUCTION

COLLABORATIONS AMONG ARTISTS can mean so many things that the notion is as mutable as the nature of art itself. They are a constant throughout the history of Western art, from the many hands that embroidered the Bayeux Tapestry to the studios of master painters like Rubens and Rembrandt, where apprentices filled in details and prepared background passages on heroically sized canvases. There can also be coequal artists, each with a different talent, such as the architect Andrea Palladio teaming with Veronese to produce brilliantly integrated decorative environments. Less formally, visual artists have always banded together whenever they realize that a vital interchange will take them further in accomplishing what they might not have arrived at so resonantly on their own. Painting side by side at La Grenouillère, Monet and Renoir inspired each other to liberate their palette with greater bravado as the days went by. When Picasso and Braque invented Cubism, Braque famously said of their partnership that they were “yoked together like mountaineers.”

These dynamic exchanges, which lasted for a certain project or brought a revolutionary idea to fruition, were short-lived. At the other extreme are creative collaborations of permanent duration, which are emblematic of twentieth-century social changes and the pluralism of contemporary art. Newton and Helen Harrison and Anne and Patrick Poirier are couples who work together exclusively and share dual authorship. Even more radical as collaborators are Gilbert & George, whose whole body of work is based on the two men being perceived as a single, indissoluble entity and their work as a single expression. Gilbert & George became a team in the 1960s, when a new openness to partnerships, as well as to nontraditional art materials and processes, helped expand the tradition of collaboration. Younger artists of the emerging avant-garde in both the United States and Europe were skeptical of reigning ideas about the angst-ridden artist, alone in a studio, creating in a social vacuum, just as they did not believe that the sine qua non of art was necessarily an oil painting in a heavy gold frame. One fresh variant on collaboration took the form of Happenings; organized by Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and members of the Fluxus collective, they were incubators for the burgeoning genre of performance art. Relatedly, for pioneering artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Christo, a participatory aesthetic was essential to their ambitions not only because their public projects were frequently too mammoth for one person to realize, but also because they identified the contributions of other people as an integral to a more expansive creative effort.

Printmaking is innately cooperative and, between the late 1950s and mid-1960s, several print ateliers were eager to introduce the latest materials and technologies and lead artists to produce innovative graphic works that would elevate the status of printmaking. Universal Limited Art Editions, Tamarind Lithography Workshop, and Gemini Ltd. (later Gemini G.E.L.) were hives of printmaking experimentation, the possibilities of which were limited only by the participating artist's

“Visual artists have . . . banded together whenever they realize that a vital interchange will take them further in accomplishing what they might not have arrived at so resonantly on their own.”

imagination. Along with printers, these studios employed scientists and manufacturers as fabricators, and the artists, in turn, became conditioned by the brilliant technical expertise to which they had been exposed. However, technology alone was never sufficient. Inventive painters and sculptors needed a collaborator who could understand all the specialized processes and materials available to them and yet was also recognizable as a fellow artist who could grasp the aesthetic aspects of creating an object and then realize and amplify their formal ideas.

It was in this milieu that Donald J. Saff, who created an atelier unlike any other in the United States, established himself in the 1960s. Although Saff had the credentials to be a master printer, once he was running his own shop he had no intention of settling into the role. Indeed, he taught art history and went into university administration because he was never interested in teaching printmaking. "Prints had very little interest for me," he recalled, "because most of what I had seen up until then were made by printmakers, and they seemed out of the mainstream of artistic issues."¹ In 1968 Saff launched Graphicstudio, his first collaborative venture, in order to encourage artists to think three-dimensionally. Hungry for alternatives and discoveries, Saff sought to midwife projects that had a bigger scale and a more imposing physical presence than conventional prints.

Saff wanted artists to produce pieces that would be advanced explorations of their chief ideas and preoccupations. His dream was to bring into being objects that were *mélanges* of painting, drawing, printing, and sculpture. They would be distinguished by the artist's hands-on variations and by his own state-of-the-art fabrications. For want of a better term, we might call the sort of objects he envisioned "thematic" or "serial uniques."

Saff had the practical knowledge, technical prowess, and unconventional outlook to offer a provocative experience to any artist who would choose to work with him. Sculptor, printmaker, art historian, curator, author, teacher, inventor, horologist, and radio tinkerer, Saff possesses a wide-ranging mind. He values serious play and freewheeling thought over the fireworks of a technical tour de force, although he has never shied away from the latter. Saff originally studied to be an engineer and possessed the aptitude to succeed at it; he retains an expert understanding of all materials and machines and can manipulate them in any way an artist might wish. As much a scholar as an artist, he regards art as a philosophic infatuation that demands his complete absorption, whether it be as a viewer, historian, maker, or partner. As a young man, Saff spent a year in Italy, where he reveled in the stimulation and intimacy of the collaborations he experienced in the print studios there. However, if one were to assign a credo to this polymath, it would be the architect Daniel Burnham's famous admonition to Chicago officials about a new design for their city: "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood."

Magic is a salient concept in Saff's operations, though not in the sense of trickery. Rather, it describes his powers to influence and to summon up seemingly supernatural reserves of energy, persistence, and ebullience in pursuit of formidable results. This has been especially true since 1965, when Saff returned from Italy and took a teaching job at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Two years later he became Chairman of the Visual Arts Department, and by 1971 he was Dean of the school's College of Fine Arts. In between, Saff proposed establishing a printshop at the university as a component of its studio art program. Graphicstudio was thus conceived and founded to make fine-art editions; it would certainly improve the students' education, Saff thought, but it would invigorate him, too. He missed the excitement of New York, and conversations with his contemporaries would make his isolated academic existence more palatable. Saff also wanted to shake things up—magic sometimes requires a little push. The first artist he invited, in 1969, was Philip Pearlstein, whom

1. Donald Saff, unpublished interview with the author, March 17–18, 2009. Roy Lichtenstein Foundation Archives, New York.

he selected precisely “because they wouldn’t allow nudes in the university. So I picked Phil to come down and force that issue, which he did, and it changed everything.”² A sustained residency with James Rosenquist in 1971 triggered an even more dramatic reorientation: Rosenquist stayed as long as was necessary to finish his work, and that became standard practice for all subsequent visiting artists. Rosenquist was a partner who was willing to try anything, and after Saff urged him to think sculpturally he began making startling lithographs, including one topped with styrene beads inside a Plexiglas hourglass (fig. 9). Rauschenberg visited Rosenquist in Tampa in 1971, and in January 1972 he arrived at Graphicstudio, presenting Saff with his headiest collaborative challenge to date.

Not coincidentally, Saff gravitated toward artists who were hospitable to collaboration. Roy Lichtenstein and Jim Dine had participated in cooperative ventures since the early to mid-1960s. Dine was a regular performer in Happenings, and Lichtenstein had collaborated with a studio potter in making his first ceramic sculptures. Both artists were veterans of print studios and sculpture foundries. They were also both signed by Multiples, the gallery headed by Marian Goodman that commissioned artists to design multiple prints, jewelry, boxes, and other objects for publication.³ Nancy Graves worked closely with fabricators and casters when she assembled and constructed her sculpture at Tallix Foundry, and she created sets and costumes for choreographer Trisha Brown’s dance company. Rauschenberg’s name is almost synonymous with audacious plunges into communal creativity, from his days working with John Cage and Merce Cunningham at Black Mountain College to his cofounding of E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) and his own sets, costumes, and performances for Trisha Brown. It was clear that Saff, who is never so alive as when he taps into his formidable artistic and mechanical ingenuity to become a problem solver, and Rauschenberg, who chose the accidental and unpredictable whenever he could, were made for each other. “Rauschenberg turned my head about what collaboration could offer,” Saff told Marilyn Kushner. His “approach to his work altered, in a fundamental way, everything I knew about art and the making of it. . . . Unexpected challenges became opportunities rather than difficulties. . . . This attitude demonstrated . . . potentialities only dimly perceived by many less flexible minds.”⁴

As the years went on Saff became so necessary to Rauschenberg’s artistic practice that, when he resigned from the University of South Florida in 1990 and moved to a house on the Chesapeake Bay a year later, Rauschenberg offered to finance another collaborative workshop, which is how Saff Tech Arts, located in Oxford, Maryland, was born. This was a shrewd move by Rauschenberg, whose critically acclaimed *Shales* series of 1994 (figs. 132–135) blossomed from Saff’s experiments in fixing images in wax and transferring them to canvas. Rauschenberg’s improvisations, in which he superimposed images on the surface of the canvas, recaptured his legendary spontaneity through inspired juxtapositions of quotidian objects, from a slice of toast to a pair of sneakers.

But Saff was more than a host and a fabricator—he was a catalyst. Unlike other shops, which functioned as workplaces for creators who customarily showed up with a plan or a loose concept already in hand, Saff himself was the generator of ideas and processes and the alchemist of materials. He then offered whatever he had devised to the appropriate artists, who could seize on it and sift it through the filter of their own insights. The element of discovery was intrinsic to both partners in bringing the projects Saff initiated to fruition.

A corollary to Saff’s origination of projects was his refusal to be discouraged. A bear of a man with an infectious laugh and a hearty sense of the absurd, Saff was constantly coaxing artists with Herculean schedules and competing claims to

2. Ibid.

3. A multiple is generally defined as a three-dimensional object purposely designed to exist as a non-unique work of art and produced by some form of mass fabrication. For excellent documentation of the subject, see Constance W. Glenn, *The Great American Pop Art Store: Multiples of the Sixties* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Smart Art Press, 1997).

4. Donald Saff, “Robert Rauschenberg: The Art of Collaboration and the ART of Collaboration,” in *Contemporary Master Prints from the Lilja Collection* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: The Lilja Art Fund Foundation, 1995), p. 249, quoted in the essay by Marilyn Satin Kushner in this volume, p. 30.

partner with him. The path from a casual conversation to a contracted project was never smooth, and in recounting how he lured artists to Tampa or eastern Maryland, Saff emerges as a modern Figaro of the arts, whose not-so-innocent suggestions and subtle schemes in service of a first-rate project are accompanied by a large dash of good-humored guile. When Rauschenberg wanted to do a project based on a hope chest, an item that reminded Saff of a coffin, he dissuaded the artist without a discussion. Instead, he bought “the ugliest hope chest that could be found”⁵ and juxtaposed it with an adroitly lit and engineered windmill. The outcome: the *Eco-Echo* series of 1993 (figs. 111–115), which consists of windmill sculptures with blades screen-printed, hand-painted, or fashioned out of metal street signs.

Keen to develop a project that would tempt Jasper Johns, Saff concocted various iterations of wax processes that acknowledged Johns’s leadership in re-examining the medium of encaustic. Although the collaboration never materialized, Saff turned his frustration to advantage by thriftily recycling his wax experiments. These included not only the process of transferring wax to canvas that led to the *Shales* project with Rauschenberg but also a method of burning, scraping, and polishing that achieved the translucent effect envisioned by James Turrell for his encaustic and mica dust paintings (figs. 121–123). This was an unprecedented project for Turrell, an artist renowned for his poetic explorations of abstract optical phenomena and his massive reconfiguration of Roden Crater in Arizona. Only Saff could have gotten Turrell to carry it out.

Being accepted by Roy Lichtenstein took an equal amount of doing. And even after Saff had gained a footing as a collaborator, an intricate minuet of semantics and definitions often had to be danced before a project could begin. For example, Lichtenstein objected to making sculpture with Saff, particularly bronze sculpture, because he had long-standing business relationships with several foundries. Undeterred, Saff proposed that they make furniture, out of wood. Lichtenstein agreed to this less-threatening proposition, and Saff enlisted engineers and furniture makers to assist him. *Brushstroke Chair, Wood* and *Brushstroke Ottoman, Wood* (fig. 47) were made from laminated birch, and Lichtenstein was happy with them. After that positive response, Saff remarked how magnificent they would look in bronze. Lichtenstein agreed, and Saff went on to publish a proper sculptural edition of six, re-creating the pair in bronze. “I subsequently realized,” Saff later said, “that Roy loved me selling him something that he knew I was selling him. He was willing to play along just to see what my approach would be. It was entertainment for him.”⁶

When it came to Lichtenstein, Saff was indefatigable. Entranced by the artist’s *Mirror* paintings, he fabricated on speculation a three-dimensional version of one in which the artist’s trademark Ben Day dots seemed to float in a void. Certain that Lichtenstein would jump on the prototype as the invention of a lifetime, Saff hurried to New York to show it to him. Lichtenstein politely said that it was a very clever concept, and then asked him to destroy it. Some months later, when Saff was about to pass the idea on to Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein called and said he wanted to apply it to a wall piece that would look like a mobile and appear to float. At first unenthusiastic, Saff nonetheless teamed up with Lichtenstein to produce the improbable *Suspended Mobile* (fig. 74), which toys with our perceptions of depth, solidity, lightness, and weight.

As the work progressed, Saff grew to like and respect *Suspended Mobile*, which was supremely fitting. Neither he nor his enterprises ever usurped any artist’s prerogatives. They only sharpened them.

5. See the essay by Marilyn Satin Kushner in this volume, p. 115.

6. Donald Saff, unpublished interview with the author, March 17–18, 2009. Roy Lichtenstein Foundation Archives, New York.

