

## The Perks of Collaboration

OCTOBER 08, 2012

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© COREY ARNOLD

A Corey Arnold photograph of a boy practicing his karate moves in a seasonal fishing village in Bristol Bay, Alaska. Advice and encouragement from his peers has helped Arnold build his career as a fine-art and commercial photographer.

If photography has dogmas—and what art form doesn't—the idea that it is an inherently solitary pursuit remains one of the most enduring. The archetype of the photographer as lone wolf, more likely to be fiercely competing with peers than collaborating, remains strong in our collective imagination. Yet that archetype was never more outmoded than it is now. The rise of the Internet, and accompanying ubiquity of social media, has helped a new generation of photographers to pool their talents and knowledge like never before.

“I am nothing without the people in my life,” says [Justin Maxon](#), who has earned accolades from organizations as varied as UNICEF, Magnum Photos and World Press Photo. “I have been shaped and sculpted personally and photographically by the friends who have shared this path with me.” Although he values his independence, Maxon is clear that his work and his success would have been impossible without the professional and personal relationships he has with fellow artists. “They act as a mirror for me, allowing me to see my own imperfections and achievements as a human being and a photographer, so that I can be better at both.”

[Corey Arnold](#), whose fine-art photographs have shown internationally and whose clients include *Esquire*, *The New Yorker* and JetBlue Airways, also testifies to the importance peers have played in his career. “I was basically living in a box in Norway, totally unconnected to stuff happening in the States and when I moved back to Portland, [Oregon],” Arnold says, “I [relied on] these connections I had made through the Internet—people who hit me up to say they liked my work and we should get a beer, and people whose work I admired that I had reached out to.” In particular, he points to Amy Stein as someone who helped him with everything from preparing for his first shows in the U.S. to navigating social media marketing.

We talked to a wide spectrum of photographers about how they collaborate with their peers in informal communities—both offline and online—and about what those interactions have meant for them personally and professionally. Whether they are critiquing projects in a workshop setting, sharing encouragement or answering questions in online discussion groups, or gathering to create exhibitions or host events, there are as many approaches to pooling resources and talent as there are to the medium itself.

### **New Orleans Photo Alliance**

Formed in 2006, the New Orleans Photo Alliance (NOPA) was born in the wake of Hurricane Katrina when photographers banded together to show local work related to the disaster, only to realize that these informal events could be turned into something much more lasting. Currently comprised of more than 300 members and structured as an artist-run non-profit, NOPA ([www.neworleansphotoalliance.org](http://www.neworleansphotoalliance.org)) sponsors a variety of workshops and exhibitions aimed at both highlighting and cultivating the local photography scene. Founding officer and current board member [Jennifer Shaw](#) acknowledges there were “times when photographers seemed more closed off and secretive,” but points out that “Katrina blew that whole mentality away.” Shaw views this newly found solidarity as a “collective resource” that she can turn to for everything from technical questions and graphic design needs, to publishing advice. In addition to roughly six in-house exhibitions a year, workshops, member meetings and portfolio shares, NOPA administers two annual \$5,000 grants—one for documentary work, the other for fine art. NOPA also coordinates PhotoNOLA, an annual photography festival that includes lectures, portfolio reviews, and other events that are free and open to the public.

Thirty years into her career as a photographer and educator, NOPA member Victoria Ryan might not be the person you’d expect to be heralding a new era of artistic collaboration. “Everything has changed,” says Ryan. “In the past, I have

always been a kind of lone [ranger] out there, gallery associations notwithstanding. But because so much has changed ... I'm working with video, I'm working with lighting, and I don't know video, I don't know lighting. So I have to seek out people who can show me what I need to do, or work with me to accomplish what I want to accomplish." At a time when, as she puts it, "after 25 years of straight, analogue, silver imagery, I'm kinda bored" and "those markets have dried up, to a large degree," NOPA provides the very tangible benefit of allowing her to venture into new genres and markets with confidence and avoid "being left behind." Fellow member and New Orleans fixture [Thom Bennett](#) echoes Ryan's sentiments when he asserts that NOPA's dedication to bringing in "photographers and curators from all over the country to jury our exhibits, conduct workshops and lecture" keeps the world of contemporary photography at its members' fingertips. Bennett feels he has benefited most from being part of a local community while "getting to know photographers from a myriad of disciplines; learning what motivates them, how they approach their subjects and how they think."

### **Piece of Cake**

Michigan-born, Brooklyn, New York-based photographer [Cara Phillips](#) is the founder of the North American chapter of Piece of Cake (POC), a community of photographers that was created in France in 2002. After POC ([www.pocproject.com](http://www.pocproject.com)) founder Charles Fréger saw Phillips's work online and approached her about bringing POC to the U.S., Phillips traveled to one of the twice-yearly POC workshops held in Europe. She left profoundly affected by the experience. "The insightful critiques and the sharing of ideas" made a big impression, yet Phillips is most animated when discussing the opportunity to learn about the European art world and be exposed to artists who were critically acclaimed in their countries but whose work had not made it to many American audiences.

Piece of Cake North America is democratically structured, with members voting on the city in which they'll hold each meeting and volunteering to handle "boots-on-the-ground" organizational tasks. While each workshop has its own creative direction, Phillips says they always try to include "meeting with a local curator or artist, visiting local museums or galleries, and critique sessions, which can be formal slide shows or informal discussions." POC makes an effort to coordinate events with outside institutions, and past examples include Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Photography, Art Institute of Chicago, Philadelphia Photo Arts Center and the Griffin Museum of Photography in Boston.

Phillips notes that the need for thoughtful feedback is something that is often at odds with a photographer's sensitivity about his or her own work; she credits the intimacy of POC with giving artists a "safe space" to seek one another's opinions and critiques. Having a strong support system has also been invaluable, she says. "For me the number one benefit is the amazing relationships that have come from being in the group. I went through a pretty serious struggle to get my first book published and without the support of my fellow members, I might have given up along the way."

### **Flak Photo Network**

The Facebook group Flak Photo Network (FPN), which has more than 5,000

members, is a constant stream of new work, ideas and discussions, moderated by self-described Web producer and photo publisher [Andy Adams](#). Adams initially launched FPN ([www.flakphoto.com/network](http://www.flakphoto.com/network)) as a discussion group in March 2011 after seeing photo-community conversations springing up all over Facebook. The growth and vibrancy of FPN speaks to the trend of photographers craving avenues to seek each other's opinions, share ideas, and discuss anything and everything to do with the medium they work in.

When Swedish photographer and FPN member [Douglas Ljungkvist](#) moved to New York City seven years ago, he stepped into a highly competitive photography market knowing almost no one. An early attempt at a collaborative project folded quickly, and those peers he did connect with were few and far between. A member of various photo groups on Facebook, Ljungkvist asserts that "none of them have the critical mass or, dare I say, clout that Flak has." This critical mass, he says, means one's questions are more likely to get answered, and answered quickly, if posted to the FPN Facebook page, and far more news and information will pass through your radar than it would otherwise. You might even find some like-minded artists who happen to live in the same city you do. As a practical example, Ljungkvist cites his own invitation to join the ASMP (American Society of Media Photographers) Fine Art "think tank" as being the result of his membership in the FPN community. He credits the online nature of the group as integral to its democratic structure, which allows everyone "a voice and opinion," instead of resembling the sort of cliques that often keep like-minded artists in their own individual echo chambers.

### **Phoot Camp**

The name may be whimsical, but Phoot Camp is a serious resource for its attendees. Which is not to say that the 48-hour invite-only creative retreat is not going to be fun—quite the contrary. Now entering its fifth year, Phoot Camp ([www.phootcamp.com](http://www.phootcamp.com)) brings talented strangers together and immerses them in a creative environment, without boundaries or dogmatic barriers. Begun in 2009 by [Laura Brunow Miner](#), former editor of *JPG* magazine and founder of Pictory, Phoot Camp happens at a new location every year and is described on its Web site as two days of "photo walks, portrait challenges, slide shows, s'more making and general creative collaboration." Brazilian-born, New York City-based photographer [Gabriela Herman](#) gushes when discussing her experience at the camp. She had followed the group online for two years before deciding to submit her work. Eventually she was invited to the 2011 iteration at an RV park in Texas.

On a practical level, being able to meet photographers from all over the country, check out their gear and swap business cards is a part of what attracted Herman to the retreat. But the spontaneous moments and connections are what proved most lasting. She gives the example of a nighttime "computer nerd-out session where everyone brought their laptops and we were all editing all together." The session, she says, was a "great way to learn about other people's workflow and learn new tips and techniques in processing and editing." Phoot Camp founder Miner describes it as "a mixture of summer camp, the leadership conferences I was hooked on in college and the best art parties of my youth."

"[Attendees] get asked all the time what the best part of Phoot is, and hands down almost everyone says the people," Herman says. "Everyone who comes to

Phoot brings something to the table in addition to their own photography passions. When you put us all together with no agenda other than to create together, the end results are magical.” She emphasizes that the benefits of Phoot Camp are much more lasting than what happens during those 48 hours. “The weekend is absolutely crazy in a good way—non-stop shooting, collaborating, bonding,” Herman explains. “But it is after, once you’re back home, that you really feel like you’ve become part of a new community.” While her early days as a photographer in New York City consisted of “religiously attending gallery openings in Chelsea” or showing up at every studio party invite that hit her inbox, now the connections she has with other artists are more lasting and more diverse than ever before.

### **Bell End**

Photographer and blogger Andrew Hetherington ([www.whatsthejackanory.com](http://www.whatsthejackanory.com)) has been grinding away at his craft for long enough to remember the days when all networking was face-to-face, and the distance between the personal work he was doing and the commissioned work he needed loomed like a yawning gorge. Hetherington credits his ability to finally bridge that gap to his own early mentor, Platon, who showed him “the power of having peers that are there to listen and give advice that you trust.” As his career developed, Hetherington was a regular at informal dinners held by his agent, [Julian Richards](#). The dinner guests would invariably be a mix of Richards’s clients and other photographers, editors, art buyers, creative directors and friends. The simple idea of taking all these people and bringing them together in “a casual, congenial atmosphere” was so successful that it begat Bell End ([www.bellendbrooklyn.com](http://www.bellendbrooklyn.com)), a restored carriage house and private residence in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, that offers a small network of photographers and photo industry professionals a place to rest their heads in the city that never sleeps, with the added bonus of networking over a communal dinner table. In the community that has formed around Bell End, Hetherington sees further proof of the idea that “we are all in it together” and makes an effort to “give back” by actively mentoring younger photographers and “hoping to be as honest, forthright, nurturing, helpful and realistic in what I have been able to do,” as his mentors were with him.

### **Razón Collective**

“The general climate of the photography community can be at times unreceptive and insincere, especially for young photographers,” Justin Maxon notes. “I’ve found that unless you have created a body of work that other people have become aware of, there are many people in this industry that won’t give you the time of day.” But just as quickly as he derides photography’s “who’s who” culture, Maxon reels off a list of photographers who guided him as a young artist, who were there for him as friends, and whose care and attention brought his work to heights he never could have scaled alone.

Maxon is a founding member of Razón Collective ([www.razoncollective.com](http://www.razoncollective.com)), a small band of five photographers scattered across the globe who share information and encourage each other in their individual work. For Maxon, Razón encourages improvisation by providing a sort of knowledge safety net, meaning that what you might not know, somebody else in the group probably does.

Any truly meaningful relationship has to come from a sincere place, Maxon says, noting that, in what is already a competitive photography world, people can smell opportunism a mile away. In building common ground with peers on the basis of something “real,” he asserts that, “The career benefits of those relationships are just the byproducts of caring about people.”

*The more that we researched how photographers are collaborating with one another, the more it became clear that the question was not, “Are today’s photographers benefiting from greater collaboration with their peers?” but, “How?”*

*In an industry that, if anything, has become more cutthroat and competitive in this digital era, photographers are eagerly creating communities online and offline, where they are pooling knowledge and resources like never before. Perhaps most importantly, all the artists we talked to were unambiguous about how invaluable these networks were to them, personally and professionally. Working together in spaces both virtual and physical, this generation is forging a new vision of what the photographic community can be.*

## **Links referenced within this article**

Justin Maxon

<http://justinmaxon.com/>

Corey Arnold

<http://www.coreyfishes.com/>

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