



# STATE OF CERAMICS

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Ceramics in Relationship to *Collaboration*:  
material reciprocity as a generative model  
a discussion guide by Sarah Christie

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## Topic:

Working in clay means that we make things from clay. But we also make with clay. The material speaks back to us: at first imperceptibly, eventually loudly if we enter into an open dialogue with it. Could this mindset of listening and 'making-with' lay fertile ground for collective and collaborative practice?

At their best, collaborations move past the notion of the singular hero-artist, acting instead as a kind of open container where ideas, actions, and processes can mix and multiply. The collective approach can facilitate play, increase the scale of our endeavors, redistribute power, and minimize limitations (real, perceived, material, and geographic). Yet these models also carry risk and uncertainty. How do we effectively use the tactic of 'making-with' to bolster constructive criticality and creative growth?

## Context:

### Provocation 1.

#### **Making-with clay: material dialogue**

To work with clay is to collaborate in a relationship of material reciprocity: I coax it, it speaks back, I try to listen. I recognize, even celebrate, that some conditions are beyond my control. We either come to an agreement, or the kiln decides. At our best, we are in dialogue with clay.

This material experience may have primed us for 'making-with' others. If we can make-with the material, can we take that perspective outside the studio, into the field, and beyond, and in doing so, grow our critical capacities in ceramics?

## Provocation 2.

### **Making-with ourselves: critiquing each other, growing our field**

Extending making-with to other artists, working in clay or otherwise, starts with dialogue and common enquiry. Most successful collaborations are made slowly, like a coiled pot. It dwells in process. It stretches to fit: from loosely joining forces, to becoming a collective – sharing costs, burdens, opportunities – perhaps progressing all the way to joint authorship.

Leaving mastery, control, and predetermined outcomes behind, collaboration takes risks in order to generate creative exchange, critical dialogue, and broader perspectives. An attitude of 'making-with' opens our practices to critical challenge from others, and positions ceramics as a subject, rather than an activity.

## Provocation 3.

### **Making-with others: developing a new language**

Collaboration outside our field demands that we learn each other's languages. Learning how process and material are understood in medicine has grown my understanding of those concepts. Finding unexpected meeting points has shown me many more possible definitions in an expansion of my own critical language.

Collaboration with the public opens further critical conversations. Accepting these challenges and developing a more critical language helps to locate our practices in richer dialogue with the wider world.

Interdisciplinary and public collaboration demands an openness to uncertainty and risk, and to the growth that comes from that. It requires clarity of purpose and communication. In return, we might find a way to expand the criticality and creative potential of our field.

## Collaborative Projects for Consideration:

Haptic | Tacit

<https://www.haptictacit.com/about/>

Clayground Collective

<http://www.claygroundcollective.org>

Helen Felcey, 'Resonating Spaces'

<https://www.helenfelcey.co.uk/projects/resonating-spaces/>

Sarah Christie and Heather Barnett, 'Small Acts of Being'

<http://www.sarahchristie.net/small-acts-of-being>

Sarah Christie, 'Reading Bodies'

<http://www.sarahchristie.net/reading-bodies>

## Suggested Readings:

Clare Bishop on collaboration, 2006.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/200602/the-social-turn-collaboration-and-its-discontents-10274>

Roger Kneebone on interdisciplinary medicine, 2021

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32757-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32757-4/fulltext)

Alice Kettle, Amanda Ravetz, and Helen Felcey, 'Collaboration Through Craft', Bloomsbury, 2013

<https://alicekettle.co.uk/collaboration-through-craft/>

## Questions for Discussion:

Why might we collaborate outside of our discipline? What can we bring back to ceramics by stepping outside of our field?

What are the implications of relinquishing control and sharing authorship?

What kind of collaborative and collective approaches could truly redistribute power?

How can collaborative practice advance critical conversation around clay? How can collaboration expand the language of 'ceramics' as we know it?

How can we build generous and collaborative projects with our communities?

How can we ensure that everyone benefits from a cross-disciplinary collaboration?

How do we handle the uncertainty of getting back what we put in – physically, emotionally, intellectually, conceptually – to a collaboration or collective?

How can we create collaborative space when funding and outcomes are uncertain?

What steps could we take to encourage collaborative relationships to emerge?