



STATE OF CERAMICS | September 24, 2021

Sarah Christie

Ceramics in Relationship to Collaboration:
material reciprocity as a generative model

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IN ATTENDANCE:

Sarah Christie, Nicole Seisler, Marina Weiner, Agata Nowak, Alison Kudlow, Anna Bingham, Anne Thiam, Ariel Gout, Ashwini Bhat, Catherine Fairbanks, Cindy Leung, CJ Jilek, Danielle Callahan, Danuta Solowiej, David Bradley, Georgia Lassner, Holly MacDonald, Jacqui Ramrayka, Jasmine Baetz, Jenn Law, Kam Chan, Kory Salajka, Kristen Morgin, Larisa Usich, Louise Frances Smith, Magdolene Dykstra, Mia Mulvey, Michelle Montjoy, Mira Hecht, Natasha Mayo, Neha Kudchadkar, Phoebe Deutsch, Robert Hills, Roz Wythes, Sara Villeneuve, Sherry Shieh, Sherry Virbila, Sybil Layouts, Teal Stannard, Zena Segre

QUESTIONS POSED BY THE ARTIST

- There is a material dialogue present in working with clay. Can we take this reciprocity out of the studio and into other areas of our practice?
- Why might we collaborate outside of our discipline?
- What can we bring back to ceramics by stepping outside our field?

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION (WRITTEN BY A-B PROJECTS ASSISTANT MARINA WEINER)

Introduction

The topic of the conversation was collaboration within and across disciplines and was foregrounded by an understanding of clay as a reciprocal material that itself demands a collaborative attitude. Participants attempted to define collaboration more precisely, distinguishing it from other forms of collective making, and to articulate the benefits of working in collaboration with other artists and practitioners outside of the field of ceramics. Christie framed the conversation in terms of three broad provocations: the material dialogue inherent to ceramics as a medium (making-with clay), critical dialogue that might emerge within ceramics if we move toward a more collaborative lens (making-with ourselves), and the development of entirely new languages and ways of thinking, which becomes possible when we consider working with others outside of the field (making-with others). Christie shared images from her practice that related to these themes.

Participation, collaboration, and ethical concerns

Considerable time was spent discussing the distinction between true collaboration and participatory projects. It was generally agreed upon that, for a work to be truly collaborative, everyone involved must have the agency to shape both outcome and process. This requires an

abandonment of the ego and of the heroic lone-artist trope in favor of experimentation, expansion, and collective growth. The funding structures that support most public-facing projects are readily adapted to a model that might be considered more participatory than collaborative: an artist develops their own idea and then invites others to execute or enact it. While sometimes valuable, this can result in work that perpetuates a savior mentality that presents the thoughts and words of a group of people (often “the public”, or a specific underserved group) as a monolith. Questions were raised about authorship in this instance, as some felt that offering specific attribution to each participant might alleviate some of this tension and make for a more authentic collaboration. Others pointed out that using participant names and identities as part of a pre-determined project might make the outcome even more exploitative.

Communication & Translation

Christie offered two broad questions to the group: “Why might we collaborate outside of our discipline?” and “What can we bring back to ceramics by stepping outside our field?” Many members of the group agreed that a major benefit to collaboration was the opportunity for communication and translation across disciplines. Christie shared her experience working as an art instructor at a medical school, which required her to articulate clearly and thoughtfully about her own discipline to others who may not have had any artmaking experience. Others agreed and offered that this kind of deep articulation and re-articulation can reveal the dogmas and norms that are embedded in our discipline, illuminating ways in which we ourselves might be ensnared in doctrine. Participants likened this practice of external processing to therapy and relationships, noting the opportunity to bring the inner dialogue outward. The most desirable outcome might be increased empathy for the other, even (perhaps especially) in the face of difficulty. Importantly, this offers permission to be wrong, and to clarify consistently in order to find common ground.

Language itself was also investigated as a site for collaboration to either snag or foment. Participants pointed out the crossover of ceramics/art language and other fields – for example, the word “plastic” can take on different meanings in different contexts. One participant offered translation techniques by Artificial Intelligence, in which phrases and sentences are mapped through meaning rather than linguistic patterns. The result is a “structure” that is more or less universal to all languages, and that conceives of language spatially as well as mechanically. It seems that collaboration can also be understood as an opportunity to find unexpected corollaries and metaphors.

Uncertainty

As much as communication and language were acknowledged as foundational to successful collaboration, participants also noted their limits – the slippage or gaps in translation that can actually be fertile territory for creative work. In Christie’s example of her work with the medical school, several participants pointed out that the role of art in this context is to make students more comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown. This outcome was considered a major benefit to collaboration in more general terms: training the muscle of working with uncertainty and the fear of failure. This returns to Christie’s first provocation, “making-with clay”, as the field of clay and ceramics in general offers a way to teach failure.