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Collaborative Interventions within the Subversive Field of Clay.

At the moment I find myself in a strange place: I have come to realise the longer I engage with my practice the more I am willing to test the boundaries of my discipline to understand how I work and why I work. Operating for many years as a solo practitioner I have become increasingly motivated by the notion of teamwork or collaboration as a way of transgressing the more complex terrain of practice and research, particularly in relation to the increasingly digitised present. Art does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it operates within a field of practices and positions.¹ I see collaboration as a process where the procedures of art making are shared, interrupted, redesigned and renegotiated. Working collaboratively enables me to perform my work, to interrupt well-trodden and predictable paths of artistic expression.

After twenty years of making work with a commitment to the genre of figuration in ceramic sculpture I consider my practice to be at an exciting threshold and even a state of ambiguity where I can move between the making of figurative works that have the conviction of the private moment and collaborating with other artists where we engage with processes of re-imagined outcomes. These

¹ Dziekan, Vince. "Beyond the Museum Walls: Situating Art in Virtual Space (Polemic Overlay and Three Movements)". Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University: *Paper for Fibre Culture Journal – Distributed Aesthetics*, issue 7, 2005.

outcomes at present involve sound works, experimentations with light and the moving image, large-scale photographs and collecting raw footage for the making of short films. I have entered into what I call the experimental zone.

The latest film I took part in was titled *La Interruption*; it was shown at the Clay and Glass film festival in Montpellier, France. Every two years since 1998, the festival comprises two days of screenings of around 30 films: documentaries, fictional and animated films. It attracts around 1,500 festival-goers, film and craft professionals and enthusiasts, directors, producers, ceramic artists, glass artists, and gallery owners. The key moment of the film, which informs the title, is when the main actress/me exclaims “*How dare you call me here!*” The film is about the obsession with materiality, filmed in black and white following the classic film noir genre from the 1920’s. *La Interruption* adopts the noir formulas in both content and production. The four-minute film includes a femme fatale character and the drama of the artist in the studio.

Another line from the film, ‘*Stay with me, I want to be alone*’, exposes the underbelly of a practice and the obsession to actually be with your work. In the film the artist interrupts herself, she is interrupted, she cannot leave; the studio is simultaneously a boat, a prison, and a garden of delight! Here we see the artist engrossed in her uncanny world of entities. The film developed out of a series of collaborations with Raimond De Weerd and addresses similar subjects we have performed over the last six years. Raimond has substantial knowledge of video and photography his expertise in these collaborations is enriching in many ways.

No Glaze no Glory, our collaboration name, has challenged my hold on object hood and ignited my interest in new media. The potential of interdisciplinary practices results in numerous negotiations and outcomes creating new arenas for discussion surrounding art-making processes. A significant outcome is an enhanced ideological and conceptual framework that enables the making of new objects. The next film in preproduction is titled *The Illusion*: here we enter into an uncanny world where what we do as makers; as people who manipulate material is totally prohibited. In this world everything is digital. The main actor, me, (still looking for a double), believes her sculptures are real and takes them to the limits of subversive behavior. On a visit to the radiographers, (she wants to know them inside and out), she places them in freezers and inverts the firing process.

The trip to the radiographers was initially to realize a project of a proposed curated show with the Fuping crew called, '*Nothing to Declare but Good Company*'. After several experiences of taking works in hand luggage to shows in different countries I was fascinated by the x-ray scans at the airport. As a trial I took one of my figurative works to be x-rayed at my local hospital. To me it was purely an aesthetic exercise but in reflection it has exposed a hybrid of connections and possibilities. This is how practice leads to research, by performing these actions and dealing with unexpected consequences. Every time I take on a new project with a collaborator of a different discipline I am fascinated with the terminology and the language that surrounds this space.

Another collaborative intervention has been working with sound, the forgotten sensorial field of clay. I have been working with compositions where I record all the sounds of clay that I have heard. From pouring buckets of slip through to the slapping and pounding, unfired clay through to vitrified clanging. This composition is woven in and out of the film at appropriate times marking poignant moments of reflection and intervention.

While the benefits have become obvious to me I question my interest in these shared experiences:

- Why do I collaborate?
- To somehow test my work?
 - To test myself?
 - To achieve outcomes unachievable on my own?
 - For company?
 - To start new conversations?
 - And why move across disciplines as a form of learning?

Marsha Meskimmon ² suggests that contemporary women artists often set up new paradigms when they consider the self as a problem and question mind-body dualism.

All these interventions feed back into my figurative work, influencing the surface, the gesture informing the narrative, setting up future theatres and ways to represent spaces within the body.

² Meskimmon, Marsha, "Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics". Routledge 2003 London, NY

As ceramic artists, we collaborate with earth, fire and water. There are constant negotiations with each stage of the process to produce the object. Through many years engaged in these negotiations I have come to question the ontology of these objects and ask (as many have before), how we may arrive at the object with more ambiguity and how processes such as collaboration assist in opening up our own field of potentiality. What seems to be an incongruous relationship between new media and the hand-made has re-ignited my interest in the material of clay and the making of forms. Consequently, I aim to realize the potencies of all of these collaborative aspects and fuse them together as a vitrified entity that takes the form of a *wiser object*, an object that brings life back into the process of its making.

Association and development of various collaborative projects have allowed me to gain skills and knowledge not normally associated with my chosen field and has shifted the way I approach my art practice.

My situation now as a maker has become more complex; since becoming slightly ensconced in academia, PHD etc, teaching at university and continuing my practice I have decided to love where I am located in all of this and take a strong grip on this seemingly rugged landscape. I intend to continue practice utilising collaborations as an integral component to my design process in the making of ceramic sculptures. My aim is to retain the poetic and let the stories that need to be told be told.

The following prose appears as dialogue in the film, *La Interruption*:

I touched you so much today, and still it wasn't enough.

Touch after touch, my palms expanding into your firm earthly loin.

I am threatened by your willingness to dry when I am not near, change texture that is no longer the tone of wetness,

I wake up in your solid chest

Vitrified, hardened, and then I lose you, your fault line structural, your surface this time will not make it for me.

Other presenters today on the panel, *teamwork, collaborations and installation*, provide different perspectives that have also helped inform my practice. Anton Reijnders work is powerful in the way it offers up a simple and direct expression of materiality. My students and I use the term “**the Anton factor**”, which reminds us all to loosen up and let the material be itself. Sometimes hanging around wood-firers can have the same effect. Now lets face it any subversive behavior shared is a lot of fun. Being caught in the act can be exhilarating, giving our selves the freedom to be in control or lose control is a choice, a challenge, the future of our industry maybe in a state of flux but our own conviction to know our work inside and out could potentially re –invigorate and contribute to the sustainability of this transgressive practice.