

# Collaboration or co-labouring—when do partnerships work?

An examination of two projects

**Janet De Boos**

Australian National University, Australia

## Abstract

*Collaboration is increasingly cited as a paradigm for joint projects in art, design and other creative areas. But whilst we readily use the term, what do we really mean by it? Is it a fully equal partnership? Or is it a benign dictatorship, with a ruling partner and orchestrated input from other experts? And does a truly democratic collaboration always produce the best results?*

*Through examination of two (what were termed) art and design collaborations, one here in Australia, and one in China, this talk will attempt to address those questions.*

---

Collaboration is a word that has a sticky history, one in which it has been seen both as a term of abuse (and indeed a label of threat), and a more recent one where it is seen as the desirable modus operandi for creative projects. This paper is a story about a number of collaborative events in which I have been involved.

I had been somewhat skeptical about whether true and equal collaboration was possible, particularly after my involvement in the East West Collaboration at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2002, which although stimulating and enjoyable, did not see much in the way of artistic collaborations.

A few years earlier I had engaged in a personal collaborative project with Jeroen Bechtold (Netherlands) to examine what was the difference between making and designing. But this was more in the nature of a search for an answer to a question of mine, in which Jeroen provided raw material for the enquiry, and responses to some of my questions. It arose out of discussions in which we agreed to disagree. (DeBoos 1997; Lane, 1997).

And some years before that there was yet another so-called 'collaboration' where I worked with a musician and a filmmaker in an effort to 'get inside' the act of throwing. This particular project had grown out of an invitation from curator Gillian McCracken to participate in a 1995 exhibition *Process and Obsession* at The Performance Space in Sydney. I then invited each of the artists (Tony King (musician) and Christine Olsen (filmmaker)) to be involved, and explained how I envisaged my installation, but allowed them to determine how they would manage their contributions to it. We all worked pretty independently, but to the same end. It was successful, and had another airing in a 2003 exhibition in Canberra titled *Collaborations- Artists and Musicians*.

## Australia

So although I had been involved in what were generally described as collaborations, it seemed rather that they were personal projects in which I had co-opted others.

In 2006 this was to be reversed. That year I saw—and acquired—a pot made by Kunmanara (Carol) Williams which was mesmerising in its beauty, and evidence of singular talent. It was in an exhibition curated by Geoff Crispin at the National Ceramic Conference in Brisbane, and it showed ceramic work from indigenous art centres with which he had been involved. Seeing the Williams work was a chance event which in the following year led to my school's—Australian National University's—involvement in a project designed by Crispin (in response to requests from the artists), in which members of three remote indigenous arts communities would come together in various locations and make work, exchanging experiences and techniques. Our role was initially to facilitate, and then ultimately to be dispensable as the artists became more autonomous in their practices. We travelled to Ernabella Art Centre in the far north of South Australia along with artists from Hermannsburg and Munupi in the Tiwi Islands, where we assisted when asked, packed kilns and did some of our own work.

After a period of a couple of weeks, the artists came to Canberra, settled into the Ceramics Workshop at ANU for three weeks and had a successful exhibition of all the work at Watson Art Centre in Canberra. This became stage one in a project that has now had its second iteration in 2011 with ANU going to Ernabella for two weeks and then artists from Ernabella and Munupi coming to ANU and Strathnairn Arts in Canberra for three, followed by an exhibition of all the work at Strathnairn Arts. There are now plans afoot for stage three in which two or three artists from Ernabella and perhaps other art centres will come to China to decorate large porcelain forms made in Jingdezhen in an attempt to provide a broader canvas for their stories as well as working in a scale impossible in Australia.

For the project to continue, it is necessary to have all parties wanting it to happen, and willing to do their part in the enabling workload. So far this has happened sufficiently for it to be ongoing, but there have been some obvious changes that are predicated on level of contribution. It has—rather perversely—become much more of a collaboration as this has happened. The parties that were less engaged have dropped out. There has been a strengthening of purpose for those remaining.

## **China**

A second ongoing 'collaboration' has been my involvement with a bone china factory (Huaguang Zibo Bone China) in Zibo, Shandong province in China. In 1991, during a China Ceramic Industry conference I was invited to go and actually work in the factory in the next year. I jumped at the chance. I had by this time become very interested in why 'handmade' was accorded a value in the studio pottery world that 'factory made' was not. This position was one that I also had held for most of my professional life as a studio potter.

Although such examinations have become commonplace now, over ten years ago they were not. Was there really some value in works made by hand that was absent in factory made wares, or was it just a story that we tell over and over again until it becomes the truth? I was looking closely at my own relationship to the objects that I used at home and the values that I accorded them and realized that amongst my most loved ceramics was a set of French industrially made, heavy porcelain mugs. Apart from the story of their acquisition, and their extreme functionality, their appeal lay also in evidence of 'the hand' at work in the small trimming and finishing lines inside the foot rings. A person had done this with a turning tool- not a machine. Yet it was only two mugs that had these marks. Were they really 'different' from the others that did not?

My project initially in the factory was to see if I could capture the exaggeratedly 'hand made' appearance of my studio work in mass produced lines, and to see if a pot that 'looked handmade', but was not, had the same value. If that didn't—how was it different? The factory—and its Head Designer He Yan was eager to have me work there as they felt that we could together develop some new lines for the company. It was a collaboration of sorts, in that the factory facilitated my making, providing mould makers and modellers, casters and glazers to make what I wanted—up to a point.

The process for the first range of works was that I sent photographs of work and hand drawn cross sections and plan drawings to the factory, so the model makers could understand the forms and be ready for the project. Then I went to the factory with a young colleague, Jiang Yanze (who acted as translator as well as did designs for her own teapots) for just over two weeks. During this time plaster models were made by hand for eight objects (teapot, three sizes of mug/cup, lidded wine ewer and small cup, pourer and sugar or sweets container), moulds were made, pieces were cast, fettled and glazed. The fired, finished pieces were pulled from the kiln just two weeks after my arrival. I was very pleased with them, and felt very attached to them, I think because I had been so intimately involved in the process. I was able to watch the meticulous shaping and finishing of the models and to correct misinterpretations from the drawings before it became too late. What had happened though, was that when I drew the objects, I unconsciously formalised the lines, and as the process of modeling and moulding progressed, this formalisation became more pronounced. As the various workers in the factory became involved in the process of realisation, my 'ownership' decreased and theirs gained. The final works did speak of handmade, but had none of the dynamic of my thrown work. (Interestingly He Yan made some changes one evening to the teapot plaster model that I was not aware of until after glaze firing. I couldn't understand why the teapot appeared to have slumped in one place. I asked two of the young modelers, who had a laugh and said something in Mandarin. I asked what they were saying, and Jiang Yanze said one was saying 'I told him so—I knew she'd notice!'. He Yan had felt sufficiently at ease and 'in charge' to make adjustments to my design without discussion. This had become a very democratic collaboration!).

I have been fortunate in having a mentor who has opened doors for me in China. Professor Zhang ShouZhi I had first met in 1996 when he came to Canberra to speak at the National Ceramics Conference. He had been a teacher at the Central Academy of Art and Design (which since has become part of Qinghua University) in Beijing, a position from which he was now retired. I had invited both Professor Zhang and his wife Professor Lu to come as visiting artists to ANU. Lu was a glaze expert, and Prof. Zhang had a longstanding reputation as an important designer in China. He was also instrumental in arranging my first visit to Huaguang Zibo Bone China.

Professor Zhang felt the same way about the loss of movement and fluidity in the teapot and other items, and he suggested that a wheel be brought into the design studio and I actually throw the models in a size large enough to compensate for shrinkage during drying and firing. This was a novel approach for a factory in China—where potters' wheels are usually not seen. The personnel working in the factory were very interested in the process, and I believe that this gave them insight into what we were trying to achieve. He also suggested that, rather than working with plain white bone china, it would be better to decorate the ware, as the plain white product was seen as 'hotel ware' in China, and decoration was seen as special. This was the opposite to the west where we were drowning in 'a sea of white', both industrially and studio-produced. When I had started producing plain white tableware, it was a relative rarity in studio ceramics, now exhibition after exhibition was all white.

As I was not a decorator (although I had used stock decals on the bone china wares in a studio investigation called 'set theory'), Professor Zhang suggested that he be decoration designer and that we make a limited edition coffee set. Thus a collaborative partnership was established. He had previously done a number of limited edition sets which had been very successful, both with Huaguang Zibo Bone China and with Chaozhou Songfa Ceramics in the south of China in Guangdong province. I was still being mentored by him through the design process, but he was happy to accept and use methods that I preferred.

This decision to decorate affected the form of the pieces, as decoration and a very fluid throwing style were somewhat at odds with each other both visually and in a practical way with regards to application. So I made composite forms that had some evidence of the throwing process, but with large smooth areas that would take overglaze transfer decoration (decals) easily. The form was quite different to my current work, but had sufficient reference to be recognisable.

Initially we thought that using a traditional Ding ware design, carved into the moulds would provide a subtle decoration of white/ white. This was not possible to do and maintain the freshness of the original carving as firstly the plaster moulds were too hard to carve freely, and secondly, any carved decoration became softened by wear on the moulds and sponging during the finishing process. So we resorted to decals based on the same designs, and Zhang ShouZhi sent a number of his sketches of them to me in Australia.

We sent these back and forth—with much discussion about how much/how little decoration we needed. Eventually we both came back to Zibo, and finally resolved the placement after more discussion and work on the actual pieces. We used a relatively primitive (by current design standards) method of printing the designs on sheets of paper, which we then cut up and stuck on the finished pot with sticky tape. We were both comfortable with this method- me because I was dealing with a real 3-D object, Zhang ShouZhi because he was of the generation that still used a pencil to draw designs—both on paper and on prototype pots. We discussed and chose together the colour for the decal design (a very light silvery grey) and also had preliminary discussion about the packaging.

The resulting work was a true collaboration between a Chinese designer and an Australian artist, and was a first of this kind for Chinese industry. It was released as a limited edition set for the Chinese domestic market, beautifully presented in pinewood boxes. We signed certificates of authentication, and the launch was in Zibo at the China National Ceramic Industry conference in 2007 and every set sold.

It was said by some that ‘the whole of China’s ceramic industry was watching’. Whilst this might have been overstating the case, it was certainly true that there was great interest, and the sets all sold—at a price (\$4000AU) that was more than double that which my handmade studio equivalent sells for in Australia. I am told that the sets are now selling on the secondary collectors’ market for 80,000rm—almost three times their initial price. What this says about the value of handmade versus factory made is interesting—especially as we usually value more that which we pay more for. The work WAS all hand made, although coming from a factory. There were people that I worked with who poured the forms, made the moulds and glazed and decorated the ware. But it was not the hand made aspects that were so attractive in the selling of the set. It sold because it told a story of collaboration between an older and highly respected Chinese designer, and a respected studio potter from Australia. The set was called ‘Harmony’ and was promoted with pictures of the two of us working together.

There is much discussion amongst social and political theorists about ‘The new Confucianism’ in China. One view holds that the hierarchical nature of Confucian society can actually contribute to economic equality. By engaging in societal rituals (honour and respect) individuals learn to control their urgent desires and are more likely to consider the common good (Bell 2008). The Huaguang Zibo Bone China factory definitely engages in social rituals, and there is great respect accorded my collaborating partner Zhang Shouzhi, myself and He Yan. Parallel with this is the inclusion of the workers and even the driver of the design studio in social events- such as lunches and KTV nights (karaoke with private rooms, disco lighting and ‘follow the bouncing ball’ video projections). The principals of the company initiate the KTV nights (and pay), and everyone takes turns at singing and encouraging and supporting the talentless ones like myself. (all Chinese seem to be able to sing in tune). This engenders extreme goodwill, and reciprocal loyalty between the management and the workers. When we are back in the studio, the goodwill carries over, and a generalized collaborative atmosphere develops. The company has also instituted annual staff photography and drawing competitions and prizes, and I am now also working on a joint decal design project where I am providing the designer who usually does the Qing—type designs with pictures of Australian native flora, leaving her to develop patterns for possible further work.

As the factory has moved to pressurised slip casting over the years since the first series was made, a smaller development and limited edition studio has been created in which the earlier hand made

methods are replicated. This has been a good development as it has allowed hand making to continue and the opportunity for more intervention in the actual process- something increasingly difficult when mechanization takes over. The collaboration between Zhang Shouzhi and myself continued, and we are next year planning to do another limited edition for the factory. The first was financially very successful for the company, and it has changed their outlook about what road they will go down in production. They have decided that they will continue to develop limited editions that are higher priced as this makes both economic sense and brands the company as creative and forward looking.

More recently (in late 2009), the factory responded to a suggestion of mine to invite seven other artists to participate in a two week making and designing symposium where we were looking at different ways of interfacing with industry. (artists were Carol McNichol (UK), Chris Weaver (NZ), Paul Mathieu (Canada), Vipoo Srivilasa (Aust/ Thailand), Takeshi Yasuda (UK), Ilona Romule (Latvia), Jiang Yanze (China), Michelle Lim (my student from Singapore) and myself. The works produced during this period have been exhibited in various venues- initially in Nanjing at the Nanjing Fine Arts Academy alongside the artists' regular studio work and also at Shanghai Expo as part of the company's trade display.

Huaguang now wants to extend the relationship with artists, and is embarking on a program of '100 teapots by 100 artists' which will form part of the display in a museum that the company is building in Zibo. The relationship has definitely now become a collaboration between myself and the factory. To me, the process of collaboration with an older and respected Chinese designer/ educator was a process of letting go of many of my preconceptions about how my work 'should' look. It was both a privilege and an education. Zhang ShouZhi's status was essential to the success of the project.

And so although I still suspect that it is very hard to have a true collaboration in the sense that each person in a project contributes equally—and more importantly has equal voice in its design- I do think that it is possible to have collaborative teamwork where two or more people contribute to the success of a project. Frequently those cited—and visible—as collaborators are not the only team members. Rather like the tip of the iceberg being just one eighth of the formation (and the hidden seven eights being equally important in preventing the capsizing of the formation), a collaborative team is often composed of hidden members. There is often also a temporal element in that different members come into play at different times.

In the Tour de France and other road cycling events, we see a collaborative team effort of this kind where each rider plays a valuable part in setting the stage for the success of the number one rider. Although Zhang Shouzhi's and my names are on the Harmony set, I do feel that it is a product that belongs to the studio—not just to us.

## References

- DeBoos, J 1998, 'A really virtual cup', *CeramicsTechnical* No 6, pp. 86-89.  
Lane, P 1998 '*Ceramic Form- design and decoration*' revised, Rizzoli International Publications pp.  
Bell, Daniel A. 2008, Chapter 3 'Hierarchical rituals for egalitarian societies' in *China's new Confucianism- Politics and everyday life in a changing society*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ pp. 38-55.

*Janet De Boos is Head of Workshop, Ceramics, Australian National University, Australia.*