

Book Review by Andrew Livingstone***Collaboration Through Craft***

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Collaboration Through Craft is a timely publication with regards to an analysis of collaboration within the frame of 'craft/s'. Makers, researchers and educators will all be aware of the rise of the term 'collaboration' within the recent and current field of practice, research, and in addition within the organisations that support creativity through funding. Whether as a coincidence or a consequence of reading this text, I should note that I have never been so aware of 'collaboration'. At the time of writing this review, I am collaborating on a publication as an editor, presenting a joint paper at a conference, working on a collaborative research funding application and developing studio work with a digital artist, all of these activities are taking place as a result of collaboration. With this in mind much of this publication resonated with me from several varied perspectives, this I am sure will also be the case for those who have already read it, or for those that will.

The authors of the text have succeeded in directing the reader in a navigational sense through the book within the introduction. One small observation, however, is that the explanation of craft and crafts is somewhat negated and could have been explored much further, elucidating its position with regards to the overall text. The introduction draws in several familiar theorists (Ingold, Greenhalgh, Dormer, Sennet, Pye, Risatti, Adamson) who help support the authors' contextualisation of collaboration through craft. Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft*, appears to set the context, maybe as a result of sharing the same component 'through craft' in the title, in this regard, it might be useful for the reader to have read or have prior knowledge of Adamson prior to embarking on this text.

The book is structured into four parts with an introduction to each by the authors. These components explore collaboration from different perspectives, each part in turn consisting of four essays that articulate a collaborative approach. Part one, *Experiencing Collaboration Through Craft*, delivers some interesting insight into the processes of collaboration, of note is Gates, Kettle and Webb's elaboration upon a collaborative process they term 'triangulation'. This honest and transparent text highlights some of the difficulties that can arise within a collaborative process, but more to the point raises the issue of the importance of conversation within the creative process. Difficulties within the process of collaboration are surely part of the territory as it is no longer about 'self' but 'negotiation' with other. The language too can be problematic, for example, Helen Carnac refers to 'exchange' and 'collaboration' throughout her text and one wonders if these are the same or can indeed be interchangeable? These areas of negotiation can cause 'frictions' as evidenced within Carnac's text. In observation the directed and prescriptive nature of a discussed project somewhat antagonises the notion of collaboration, as is evident in the evaluative language used by participants. The transparency in respect of highlighting some of the difficulties within a collaborative dynamic is certainly a key strength

within this publication as it points to the realities of situations as evidenced through its focus on the processes of collaboration.

Part two *The Generative Power of Craft*, explores materiality through technological and scientific interfaces. Trish Belford demonstrates the successes of collaboration through the development of ‘textile concrete’ a hybrid material that draws together craft, fashion, science, technology and architecture. Belford guides the reader through the process and experiences when ‘two people’ and more interestingly ‘two disciplines’ come together and how collaborative expert knowledge can deliver new materials and expanded areas of investigation. In examining materiality within the crafts and the skills and processes that are involved and applied, somewhat perceived disparate occupations can have shared commonalities. In observation, a project ‘*sKinship*: an exchange of material understanding between plastic surgery and pattern cutting’, is explained by Rhian Solomon where she draws out the corporeal similarities applied within both disciplines. Solomon’s text certainly reminds us of the power that craft skills can possess and these are not just assigned to arts and design practice.

Part three *Institutional Collaborations* as expounded in the title puts forward perspectives from academia and museum. Pedagogical and institutional elucidations are delivered from both student and tutor perspectives, one such essay *Department 21: The Craft of Discomfort* presents an initiative developed by students at the Royal Collage of Art, where its initial plan was to ‘set up a radical, interdisciplinary, workshop’. The essay discusses the initiative where students step out of formal teaching and create an arena of exchange and free-thinking.

It is hard to be convinced by the notion of ‘craft of discomfort’ within this context, as the initiative is located within an arena of ‘safe exchange’ and one could argue that an analogy could be drawn with ‘the spoilt child (student) who rebels against his/her parents (establishment RCA)’. Within institutions and particularly academia, transdisciplinary approaches to research and teaching are at the forefront of current agendas and this is also the case for ‘highlighted calls’ from funding bodies. Within their well-referenced text, Hawkins and Wilson eloquently discuss the successes and potential failures of transdisciplinary collaboration within the structure of postgraduate pedagogy. Several points are raised, however, once again the notion of ‘contemplative space’ emerges, as it has many times in this book, as a fundamental important aspect of the collaborative process.

Part four *Collaboration in an Emerging World: Another Way of Being?* explores craft through its extended possibilities. Two of the four essays put forward narratives from collaborative processes and exchange through projects undertaken in India. Both texts are illuminating with regards to highlighting the practicalities and processes of working within different cultural contexts. In contrast, Alison Smith presents a personal time-line of her work and its reference to civil war reenactment and the territories associated to ‘living history’. Self-referential in approach this text somewhat obfuscates the notion of ‘collaboration’, however, it does inform with regards to developing creative practice utilising military history as a form of influence. This section appears to be the least resolved given the potential of the subject matter of the book and although the texts are informative, at the same time they appear disparate rather than cohesive.

Within this book several terms re-appear throughout the various essays. ‘Play’ is one such term that comes to the forefront as an important issue – also the ‘space’ created by collaboration, discussed as ‘creative’, ‘thinking’ and ‘contemplative’ in many of the texts. The emergence of these terms indicates that in relation to an evaluative hierarchy it is the interstices or in-between spaces that provide stimulus with regards to collaboration. Several other points are brought to the fore in this book that indicate that collaboration is a fertile arena that has the capacity to extend creative and theoretical application in the crafts and beyond.

The editors have succeeded in delivering a relevant examination of collaboration within the craft/s arena and one that I am confident will prove to be a very useful resource within the development of craft discourse. For those interested or embedded within collaboration this book is a must read. Although *Collaboration Through Craft* touches on the critical it isn’t the focus of the book, instead it is aligned towards the ‘processes’ of collaboration as evidenced through the editors selected examples. Whilst there is further potential to explore collaboration within a critical and theoretical context, this does not compromise the books power or legitimacy. One of the main strengths lies with its accessibility supported in turn by the diverse exemplars presented with regards to collaboration.

To draw on Adamson’s conclusion to the book, he states; ‘most artists, when they put their heads together will learn a lot about themselves’ – I would say that by reading this book a similar observation could be applied to the reader and in particular, for those who are engaged with collaboration in its many forms.