

## The Distributed Studio

Janet DeBoos 30 November 2006

**Abstract:** *The Distributed Studio* was presented by Janet DeBoos at the Verge conference in Brisbane in July, 2006. The focus of the conference was sustainability for the individual and the collective. Janet DeBoos was a key speaker and her presentation focused on arts education, and new models for survival in the twenty-first century.

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I am going to talk today about a model for a kind of ceramic art practice that might mean ceramics as a discipline within the twenty first century art school survives. It is called the distributed studio approach, and it is as relevant for education in ceramics as it is for the individual practice itself.

This has been an aspiration of mine for many years, and first crystallised in one of those epiphany like moments in a late summer class when I was listening to a lecture for students on how to plan a studio. The 'perfect studio' described in this lecture had everything that was deemed to be desirable for the practising ceramic artist. I was flicking through a magazine at the time, one ear cocked to the lecture, and I came across a photograph of a group of aboriginal women sitting on the ground, making pots, seemingly (although I do acknowledge the capacity of magazine photos to lie) in the middle of the desert. It was so far removed from the place being described on that hot afternoon in Canberra, and yet the two places were directly linked. Suddenly it was perfectly clear. A studio is where you work. It could be anywhere, and be equipped in any way.

I am convinced we have seen the end of art education, as we have known it. The model under which I and most of my peers trained was one of relatively long studio contact hours, highly directed study, and an assumption that we would have a practice making things, the sale of which would support us - if not comfortably- then at least allowing us to survive. It was an individualistic, self-expressive approach that today is not possible to sustain on the broader front, and to adopt this model is - for both artists and teachers - to abstain from any broader responsibility to the world we live in.

In the heyday of ceramic art, the nineteen eighties, there were at one stage, thirty six degree granting art schools offering specialist ceramics across Australia, catering to a population of some 15.5 million. Despite this saturation, these schools tended to act in isolation, replicating what was offered in each, and splitting the available students. As ceramics declined in popularity through the nineties as a choice for school leavers wanting to study at art school, the competition for these students became fiercer, and inevitably, there were not enough to go around. In an economically rationalist climate, and coupled with their heavy running costs, ceramics departments - particularly those that clung to the old order, started to be closed down.

Whilst this may seem a disaster to some, it was in reality long overdue, and can be seen as an opportunity to rethink our practices. I am sure that it will eventually result in a diversification of practice (The Distributed Studio) that can only be healthy - if not as safe as the former model.

I wanted to find a metaphor for this Distributed Studio that could help explain how I see its operation. I looked at the idea of a tree branching, the various practices within the studio represented by the ever diminishing branches, but still all connected to the trunk through a complex system of levels of operation (and importance?) but decided this was not how I saw the much flatter, and less clearly directed studio of the future.

What is needed is a flexible, adaptive model that connects across the boundaries imposed by the vertical lines of a conventional organisation. On further reflection it seemed that the current use of the rhizome as a metaphor for structures, which are non-hierarchical, seemed to offer a potentially much stronger model. (See Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi 1987, University of Minnesota Press). Of course this also appealed to an ex botanist, and so I examined a familiar rhizome closely, and thought that it was possible to squeeze ceramics practice for the future into that".

There was a major woody core, but many sub branches which divided, and overlay one another, and produced new buds without thought of dominance of any one. The central core thickened and thinned (just like what is regarded as core knowledge waxes and wanes, but the very materiality of clay remains stubbornly inescapable) and on the whole it seemed a healthy metaphor for The Distributed Studio. This model also seemed to fit the kind of relationships that I see developing, where students work alongside staff as 'junior peers', contributing to the nourishment of the whole organism. This is very different to the past where our teachers 'handed down' information and knowledge, and we in turn handed that down to our students.

But was this the best way of looking at future ceramic practice? Could there be a better metaphor? In ceramics we tend to make things, and often to have a passionate relationship with those things. There are those inspired breakthroughs and the dull times. I wondered if the quiet, directionless spreading of the rhizome could accommodate this? Would it allow for these things? These outcomes? Maybe we could utilise an even more fluid structure? Perhaps the sea?

Sometimes our practice might be turbulent and dangerous- something that can lead to high creative output, and sometimes it might seem becalmed. But it can also be like bobbing out back of a surf, going up and down with the waves, lots of movement, but going nowhere. Maybe catching a wave? Somehow the sea didn't seem to provide the right model.

Maybe our passionate relationship with things ceramic could be represented by our passionate relationship with something else - the dog. There is no middle ground here - you usually love them or hate them. So it is with ceramics. It is a hard 'dirty' material that is inconvenient to lug around. Why do we do it?

Just like dog ownership, it seems to be due to either a deficiency in us, or an entrancement with the thing. So maybe if the many forms of dog could be seen as different modes of ceramic practice, we might have a model?

There is the basic, functional dog, not exciting, but does the job. Safe. Oh dear, did I say safe? The death knell of creative practice ... but there is another kind of functional dog - and this might be the guardian of Garth Clark's 'Fortress'. Dangerous, resentful, but also going nowhere ... there are other kinds of fortress guardian dogs, but they tend to stay tethered to the fortress that feeds them. We could also let our metaphorical dog out for a drive, looking, wondering, and feeding on new delights. Now this looks like a good option. The dog could ride freely across art practice.

But we have to be careful not to close off the outside world and retreat into a position of insulated comfort. The 'dog' might be better going for a walk.

There is a travelling 'dog' however that can actually make a home on the road, that travels freely through different landscapes, but stops along the way. This allows for interaction with the world, whilst establishing a

flexible home address. This 'dog' avoids typecasting. It is outgoing, confident, and doesn't need to stay in the ceramic kennel. It is usually a dog that creates momentum and takes others along with it. There is room in the Winnebago. But the others are usually copyists and stylists. They do it well, and look good but are not very original. Some, unfortunately, don't even look good.

But these are not the only types - there is another kind of ceramic 'dog' that has her eye on what is just out of reach and dreams of the future (picture of dog on ground eyeing parrot on table, eyeing peach in dish). This kind of imaginative thinking of future possibilities- the exploration of the potential of the situation and the endless permutations of ceramic practice and all things contingent upon it - is the way to operate. But the dog in our picture has a clear goal, and that's not what happens in art practice where we think, we imagine, we make, and so we think.

Despite the amusement of these characterisations, I find myself coming back to the rhizome with its swelling, branching form. It is active in growth; all parts contribute to the nourishment of the whole and there is the development of a variable, but strong (woody) core. If ceramic practice is to flourish I feel strongly that there should be room for core traditional practices such as woodfiring, if only to engage intimately in ceramic processes. It feels good to woodfire. This doesn't mean that everything that is woodfired is good, just as with any other process. But for learners, that complete engagement in process (in raku also) helps them understand how things come into being. Most of the material understanding of ceramics falls into the core of our rhizome.

I don't feel as pessimistic about fortress functional as Garth Clark does, and can see it as an extending branch on the rhizome. As an observer of archaeological digs, I see how careful sifting of the same sand with a finer sieve yields new information, and as with mining practice, when new technologies are developed, the same ground can be re-mined with higher extraction rates.

Another branch would be made up of teams - in the studio and in the broader community - providing the connectedness that we seek and need as human beings.

There has been a tendency in the past to separate ourselves off from community groups in professional or academic 'silos'. This has been neither helpful nor generous. We should remember that the collective that is the community group is also feeding our rhizome, and rather than being the broad base of a hierarchical pyramidal structure, is just another arm or branch of that rhizome.

For this branch, there needs to be community access studios, where the making is also part of the education of a viewing public. The [Canberra Potters' Society](#) is a part of our lumpy rhizome in the ACT, as are its members who branch out and run their own programs in holiday periods.

There will be another extension of this branch, and that is the international residency studio. This is a picture of one such studio in Beijing. There are many of these now, and in addition our own Australia Council maintains about twelve studios spread around the world, and they are invaluable for the experience of immersion in another culture. Through these residencies, artists start to form the networks that are part of the very structure of the rhizome. The experience of even just 'doing what you do' in the company of new colleagues, with new materials in a new place enhances and enriches ceramic practice. It feeds the rhizome.

This is another place in China where you can undertake a residency, [FLICAM](#). Here, one works in a factory that produces architectural elements, and offers resident artists from across the globe access to factory facilities. All the work made is housed in a series of museums that are being built for various geographic regions. (Scandinavian Museum and French Museum are already opened, Australasian and North Americas Museums due to open next year). This is a project that is moving at the speed of light, and will afford the opportunity for an ongoing stream of Australians to mix with fellow artists from other countries to work in a Chinese factory. The OH&S aspects of this factory are somewhat questionable, and there is also the ethical consideration of whether you can ask the Chinese workers to do for you, what you would not be willing to do

yourself. But this is unquestionably the real world.

There are others at the opposite end of the spectrum, such as the EKWC [European Ceramic Work Center](#) in s'Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands.

Here there is a technical literacy and facility unmatched in any government funded studio program. For twenty years or so artists of all persuasion have availed themselves of the facility which has developed technical expertise particularly in making and firing big ceramics and working with new technologies. The artists can access equipment that they would never have in their own studios- gantries, forklifts, huge kilns and trolleys. The EKWC also has ongoing programs of research (currently the 'brick' project) that bring together artists from several countries in a research environment within a specific context. This meeting, working and sometimes collaboration with international artists is becoming increasingly common, and through a 'connected' rhizome feeds more than just ceramic practice.

Engagement with countries like China, India and Africa will have to be part of our Distributed Studio rhizome.

If you take a map of the eastern hemisphere, with Australia more or less central in it, and you draw a circle that encompasses India and China (and Australia), you have just encircled over 60% of the world's population. This is not without impact on our lives.

I am involved in a couple of projects in China, and find myself often correcting what is a common misconception about that place. And that is the misconception, that it is a country chock a block full of cheap, unskilled labour. Quite the contrary - it is a country brimful of cheap, highly skilled labour. As China's economy has boomed, there has been, of course, the generation of spectacular individual wealth. But there is now also the emergence of a middle class. New to China, it is affluent, and increasingly leisure rich. And there will come a time when the labour is less cheap. What are the ramifications of this? Well, I see them already in the bone china factory with which I am involved. The workforce there has been almost halved over the time of my involvement due to the installation of pressurised slip-casting. This has meant that the almost studio-like production that used to occur is diminishing, along with the variance that hand making allowed. The workers had always seemed quite happy, relatively unhurried. The working conditions seemed quite good. What will happen now is yet to be seen. But for all that, it is engagement with what is happening in the real world, and that in itself fuels our practice - or should I say - feeds the rhizome.

The connectedness described above extends to the 'halfway house' studio, where graduates can work in their own 'place' but aided in the transition years through subsidised rents and the support of their peers. Graduate study will increase as the degree granting institutions and faculty move more into a mentoring role and I can see the undergraduate courses fracturing even more than they have done recently, and moving to an 'intensive workshop' style of teaching. This will enable students to move into, and out of courses, and will extend the time over which they complete their study. It will also enable them to 'knit' ceramic practice into a wider discourse as they move into and out of different media, or different disciplines. Where are the ceramics courses for archaeologists? And the courses for engineers? The courses for development aid are also invisible ... here will be a big fat branching part of our rhizome.

We will also find another branch that engages specifically with the technology that is commonplace in industry, but still relatively rare in studio ceramic practice. Michael Keighery has used CNC milling to create relief tiles, and at the Australian National University we have a [Rapid Prototype machine](#) for making models for subsequent moulding and an inkjet facility with the capacity for printing directly onto ceramic tiles with ceramic pigments. The RP machine uses computer files to lay down, one thin slice at a time through an CAD file 'object', an extruded polymer (Rod Bamford's "rapid glue gun"). This makes a plastic model from which a mould can then be cast with a level of accuracy and speed unthinkable in the old hand modelled process. At the same time but in a different material, a scaffold is laid down to support the model until it is set hard. This scaffold can be snapped off afterwards, and is sometimes more interesting than the model itself.

In addition, we have had some engagement with the CSIRO Haptic Workbench, looking at the creative potential of [virtual modelling tools](#).

It is unlikely that any model for the distributed studio could ignore distance education in ceramics. This kind of course spans continents, making access to ceramic education possible for those, who, for various reasons, can't attend on campus courses. Australia has always been good at these things. The School of the Air, the NSW Correspondence School, and the Flying Arts School amongst others have all been models for the present Distance Ceramics Course run out of ANU School of Art. Owen Rye for many years ran Distance graduate courses from Monash University's Gippsland campus, which catered to experienced ceramic artists, who, more often than not, were themselves teaching at tertiary level. It was highly successful, producing many fine graduates.

The course at ANU was somewhat different in that it sought to train in basic skills as well as develop the critical faculties of its constituents. Starting primitively with videotapes and email, it now produces its own DVDs and has a unique online glaze course developed by Gail Nichols and Patsy Hely with input from Greg Daly and myself. And Gail is herself a PhD graduate from Owen Rye's course.

There is often a questioning of whether it is possible to teach in a tactile, plastic medium by distance. Those of us who have done a lot of teaching will know that a good proportion of it is the letting students make their own mistakes in their own time ... then having them practise over and over again to achieve facility in some skill. The use of the videos is an aid to this, and means that the student can watch a demonstration over and over to get a particular part 'right'. This couldn't happen in the classroom on campus. There the demonstration is done, maybe twice at most, and then the class moves on. Students who have used the DVDs tend to be more receptive to on campus input. They are 'primed' to take in. This has frequently resulted in better outcomes for these students than those who are permanently on campus.

The distance teaching is (and must be) supported by intensive workshops, making it, technically, a mixed flexible delivery course. As we have started the course in Canada now (run in Alberta at Red Deer College), with the same on campus workshops and the same teachers, we are finding that students are moving between the various campuses, sometimes doing the intensive delivery portion in Canada, sometimes in Australia.

As well as this mode of delivery, some universities have established [campuses offshore](#) - RMIT in Hong Kong, and the University of NSW (College of Fine Art) in Singapore.

Before I finish teaching, I would like to see all ANU undergraduate ceramics courses become flexibly delivered, and the graduate program also. This would enable our studio to be truly distributed, and like any healthy rhizome, would have nutritional input from each of the branches. There would still be a woody core at ANU though, as this seems essential for a sense of belonging despite the fact that communities are now formed quite differently to those of the past.

There is another arm that could form part of our rhizome. Industry. And I am not talking about that interaction with industry that happens in artist residencies, but the (for many) spectre of design. There has tended in the past to be a division between those who might describe themselves as designer/makers (isn't that almost everyone in the field?) and 'clean' designers. (one of Susan Cohn's designs ... badges from the Freestyle exhibition says that design is ... not getting your hands dirty ...) Yet we never really have explored the potential of mass production for artmaking.

I will briefly describe the reasons for my involvement with the bone china factory I mentioned earlier, in Zibo, Shandong Province in P.R. China. It happened by chance. I visited the factory and said in passing that it would good to have some time there, and suddenly that casual comment turned into a formal invitation.

Now, the whole of my practice is about the value of the handmade, so going into a factory could seem to be

signing off from being a 'true believer' and effectively destroying the whole premise on which the practice was built. But having a science training of the old school, I have always felt that you need to test any belief against a null hypothesis. That meant that rather than just subscribing to the belief that 'handmade was better', I could test whether things that 'looked handmade' (but were actually industrially made) had qualities and a value that was equal to handmade pieces. (see [Journal of Australian Ceramics vol44#1, April2005](#))

I am still not sure about the outcome of the question about the value of the handmade, although I do know the answer that would be most comfortable ... So we plug on with trying different things - most recently actually throwing in the factory so that moulds could be taken directly from the thrown pieces, rather than use models made from plaster. Although throwing with bone china was rather like throwing with toothpaste, we ended up with a tea set, with all cups different just as a hand made set might be.

This is still in the development phase, but I use it as an illustration of how taking chances leads to interesting research, as the use of freshly thrown work for models was something quite new to the factory, and I suspect might be a first in industry. Graduate students have also been involved in factory work, and one, Jiang Yanze had work of hers in development to the point of pre-production. This phase generates many seconds (which get ground down and recycled into the bone china body), but she was able to intervene, and use the teapots to make assemblages, which went through the glaze firing again and became fused into single pieces. This is an opportunity that would not have happened without the factory involvement.

So our rhizome keeps growing through accessing new nutrient sources, new garden beds.

For it to be healthy we have to be able to go into more risky places- places we don't necessarily expect to like, and particularly those places where our beliefs can be challenged.

And so you can see that not only are there endless possibilities for The Distributed Studio, but that it is almost the only answer. We cannot afford to allow ceramics to exist in a ghetto (or a fortress in Garth Clark's scenario), or even for it to be a tree with well-established hierarchies and branching only in one direction. It is too obvious a target - too easy to chop down once the doors of the fortress are breached, too easy to starve of nutrients if it stays rooted in one place.

And to some degree, although the rhizome has served us well as a metaphor, it too is subject to damage by even quite shallow digging. It then becomes isolated as separate organisms (design and craft, industry and art,) even though they may continue to grow, they cease to benefit from each other as fully as they might.

I was trying to think of a better metaphor for our Distributed Studio, and my interest in fungi came to my aid. Of course, the mycelium ...

The mycelium is that woolly, amorphous stuff that you often see on rotten logs and is made of threads called hyphae. It is also present underground in fungal colonies, and is what spreads outwards and then makes 'fairy rings' when it reorganises into the familiar mushroom and toadstool shapes. It is the unglamorous life blood of certain kinds of fungi. It is most eloquently described by the English mycologist Alan Rayner who has spent many years studying the behaviour of mycelia in forests,

"... there is perhaps a natural tendency to regard ... the mycelium as a boring, uniformly absorbent mass of hyphal threads which, whilst important in energy capture, only really become interesting when parts of it aggregate and differentiate into a fruit body ... I have increasingly come to regard the mycelium as a heterogenous army of hyphal troops, variously equipped for different roles and in varying degrees of communication with one another. Without a commander, other than the dictates of their environmental circumstances, these troops organise themselves into a beautifully open-ended or indeterminate dynamic structure that can continually respond to changing demands. Recall that during its potentially indefinite life, a

mycelial army may migrate between energy depots; absorb easily assimilable resources such as sugars; digest refractory resources such as lignocellulose; mate, compete and do battle with neighbours; adjust to changing microclimatic conditions; and reproduce."

And so I think we have the perfect metaphor, because in The Distributed Studio we do not have to be constantly visible to be vital and viable. The Studio can migrate with our wonderful chameleon of a material between different 'energy depots', and accept a diversity of practice that is healthy and sustaining.

And we won't have to fit into a skin that's the wrong size and shape.

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