



HALF AND HALF

An artistic blind date and what came of it

Ucki Kossdorff

Who will I meet? Will we get on? Will the chemistry be right? What will come of it?

Umpteen typical “blind date” questions such as these were buzzing around in the heads of the 17 participants from 9 different countries who had arrived in late October at the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemet for the symposium “Half and Half”. The ICCA* had invited its members to take part in a highly unusual experiment, and only the bravest had taken it up: fifteen female artists and two (even braver) male ones.

The concept had been developed by the art director of the ICCA, Ucki Kossdorff, to persuade ceramic artists, traditional loners, to take part in a personal and artistic exchange.

The plan: the artists draw lots to form pairs for two joint art works. They each begin one work and each finish one. They each raise the bar as high as possible, and they each make their own mark on their partner’s work. This demands a great deal of respect for the partner’s work and a professional eye for the artwork as a whole.

The members of the ICCA committee were immediately taken with the idea, but a great many meetings were necessary to deal with the organisation, to find a venue, appeal unsuccessfully for sponsors (the “crisis”!) and even a trial symposium took place before the symposium proper could begin.

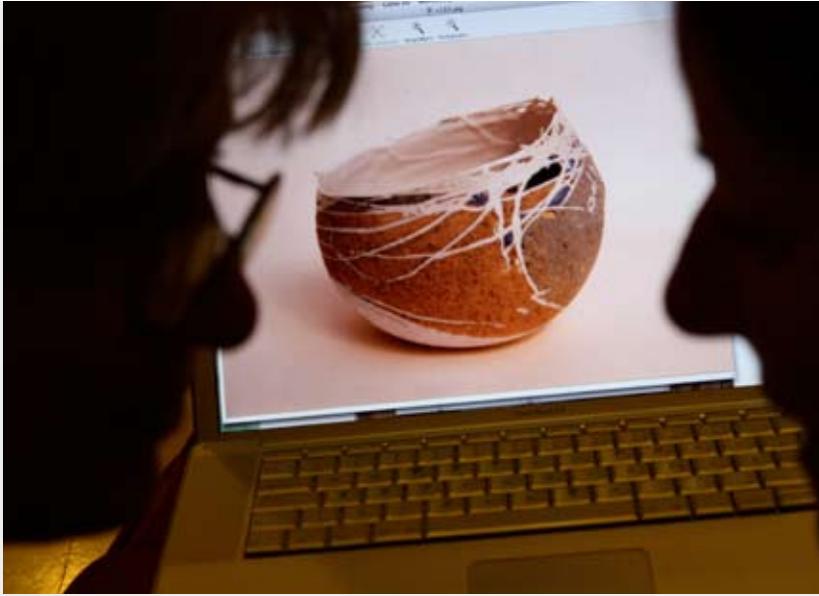
But to return to Kecskemet: after the happy phase of meeting again or meeting for the first time, moving into rooms and setting up workplaces, and the greeting and guided tour with Steve Mattison from the ICS, work started on the second day. Everyone started work, either spontaneously or based on a plan. So that the first half of the piece could authentically reflect the first artist, the drawing of partners was cleverly scheduled for the evening, after the foundations of the piece had been laid. This guaranteed that nobody could “adjust” to their partner. But of course people casually strolled around, took a clandestine peek or made prophecies: “...If I get this piece, I’ll shoot myself...”

ILLUSTRATIONS -

above - **the Half and Half pairings** (starting at the back), slightly mixed up because of height, Constance Ferdiny-Hoedemakers (A) + Cristina Popescu Russu (RO). Ucki Kossdorff (A) + Luo Xiao Chong (CN). Ester Beck(IL) belongs with Petra Bittl (D), one row from the back. Nica Haug (D) had two partners, Gabriela Nepo-Stieldorf (A) and Johanna Rytökölä (FIN). Liviu Russu (RO) + Elfi Grünsteidl (A). Heide Nonnenmacher (D) + Veronika Thurin (I). Monika Hinterberger (A) worked with Christa Zeitlhofer (A), back row, right. And Christa Ecker-Eckhofen (A) with Szilvia Ortlieb (HU/A), back row left. (photo: Steve Mattison)

right - Elfi Grünsteidl





Then came the big moment: Sarka Radova, the well-known ceramist from Prague and artist in residence in Kecskemet at the time, drew the names out of the (ceramic) hat two at a time. As there was an uneven number of participants, Nica Haug offered to work with an extra partner.

The excitement was palpable and audible. Like the chatter in classroom. Then the relief when the pairs were announced. There were reactions ranging from embraces ("I knew I would get you") to the humorous "I was afraid of that..." And some participants were totally unfamiliar with their partner's work, so they made a dive for the catalogues, which had been laid out in preparation. One pair grabbed a computer and set to work studying each other's work. There were partners who work in very similar fashion, such as Christa Zeitlhofer, who had drawn her colleague from the ICCA committee, Monika Hinterberger, and others who were completely different. The initiator of the symposium herself had the greatest contrast: Luo Xiao Chong, a well-known ceramist and lecturer from China, was speechless: "Oh, my partner is a sculptress!"

The participant who had promised to shoot herself drew precisely the partner she had been afraid of. And just to let the cat

out of the bag here and now, they produced a particularly interesting joint piece, largely due to this tension.

After everyone had managed to calm down a little, the work began in earnest. Some people had such a clear idea of what they wanted that their first halves were finished in two days, others had a complete mental block because of what they knew of their partners.

But thanks to the wonderful atmosphere at the Studio, the unique sense of empathy between the participants, and not least the excellent lunch menus in the restaurant around the corner, everyone managed to enter into the flow of things and began to enjoy working, away from the constraints of time and everyday life. In between times, the participants gave presentations, e.g. on contemporary Israeli or Chinese ceramics, spontaneous demonstrations (Petra Bittl) and a guided tour of Budapest with Szilvia Ortlieb, charming Austrian-Hungarian committee member.

Handing over the works to the partners was not easy for everyone. For instance Constance Ferdiny handed over her piece to Cristina Russu with the solemn words, "I hereby hand my work to you. You can do with it what I want." A classic slip of the

tongue, which was greeted with understanding laughter all around.

The question of how to start basic structure of the partner pieces dragged on for several days, as the first phase was finished at different times.

Petra Bittl sliced up Ester Beck's dynamic vessel sculpture bravely but "respectfully", lined it with her "nets" and made an exciting mural piece from it. Elfi Grünsteidl, who had been delighted with her partner, constructed her bright blue U-shaped elements in the architectural sculptures of Liviu Russu. Gabriele Nepo-Stieldorf built a stool, for which she made a cast of Nica Haug's behind, but which in the end turned out to be a male torso. And Nica Haug in her turn made a fairytale frame with a colourful "heart" for Johanna Rytkölä's "portrait" of a ginkgo leaf she had found in the garden. Heide Nonnemacher made cubes with poetic appliqués, with Veronika Thurin going one

ILLUSTRATIONS -

top left - getting acquainted - Cristina Popescu Russu + Constance Ferdiny-Hoedemakers

top right - Christa Ecker-Eckhofen

bottom left - Ester Beck for Petra Bittl

bottom right - Johanna Rytkölä





further, adding a huge blue rose in a perfectly matching style. And Christa Ecker-Eckhofen created "The red picture for the red sofa", by making space in Szilvia Ortlieb's huge coiled cube to fit a slab, and prepared interchangeable changeable slabs with various ceramic surfaces for it. Christa Zeitlhofer cut up Monika Hinterberger's three cubes with holes going through them and made six pieces from them. Monika said in surprise, "I always wanted to look through but never to look inside something." And Luo Xiao Chong planted Ucki Kossdorff's severe female figure with a sea of flowers – but only "after a sleepless night because her piece was so finished". Far East meets West.

And the whole thing happened again in reverse with the partner's half. It was incredible to see what was achieved in only ten days.

But luckily there was a deadline: firing day. And in spite of the excellent local experts managing of the firing, that was the only slightly stressful day: although there were gas and electric kilns, the artists, who

were all technically highly versed, would have liked to have the chance to conduct a test firing with the unfamiliar material. But before the mood could turn sour, agreement was reached that the whole thing would be regarded as an exciting and wonderful experiment, and at the subsequent exhibition on 15 April in Szombathely, everyone was to bring one perfect piece of their own to show what they can do and what spirit was behind the joint pieces.

At the end, everyone was in agreement: a symposium had rarely had such a fantastic creative and empathic atmosphere. Everyone had managed to give a back seat to their own egos and at the same time to demonstrate all of their creative ability and individual style in a joint piece of work. And everyone was convinced that looking further afield would have a lasting effect on their own work. But above all, "Half and Half" was proof of the positive force that can emerge when you dare to take risks in life.

The participants reports will appear shortly on the ICCA website.

The ICCA / International Contemporary Ceramic Art was founded in Vienna in 2004 by the ceramic artists Christa Zeitlhofer (business manager) und Ucki Kossdorff (art director) to raise the profile and increase appreciation of contemporary ceramic art in an international context.

More on the ICCA and how to become a member on their website:

www.icca-ceramicart.com

ILLUSTRATIONS -

above l. to r. - Livius Russo - Szilvia Ortlieb
- Monika Hinterberger

below l. to r. - Petra Bittl - Gabriela Nepo-Stiendorf +
Nica Haug - Heide Nonnenmacher

opposite page l. to r. - work by
top - Constance Ferdiny-Hoedemakers +
Cristina Russu

- Szilvia Ortlieb + Johanna Rytkölä
middle - Liviu Russo + Elfi Grünsteidl

- Szilvia Ortlieb + Christa Ecker-Eckhofen
bottom - Gabriela Nepo-Stiendorf + Nica Haug
- Ucki Kossdorff + Luo Xiao Chong



