

## **Who's Zoomin' Who? The Agency of Clay**

The following is the transcript of the second part of a talk I gave at **The Centre for Human Activity Annual Symposium 2015**. (University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark)  
I describe what I think happens when I make objects out of clay and what happens when someone then looks at the objects.

The symposium was entitled: **Interactivity, Cognition, and the Embrained Body**

I started using clay more-or-less by accident. I found I could play with it and use it to construct objects in front of me that hitherto existed only vaguely in my consciousness or not at all. I could use clay to make discoveries - to bring to fruition shadowy, barely visible ideas or bring into being objects of which I could not possibly have conceived otherwise. With clay I see the thinking process happening in front of me.

This particular relationship with material is neither original nor new. Here is Francis Bacon (Sylvester, 1975 pgs. 16 and 121)

**...I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it , and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint... I don't know very often what the paint will do and it does many things much better than I could make it do.**

**With oil paint being so fluid, the image is changing all the time while you are working... you see , I don't think that generally people really understand how mysterious , in a way, the actual manipulation of oil paint is.....because moving – even unconsciously – moving the brush one way rather than the other , makes a mark which gives resonance to the other marks**

And Bridget Riley (Kudielka R, ed. 1995, pgs. 38-40) in discussion with Ernst Gombrich

**...It's the medium that surprises you. One of the most wonderful things about painting is that its resources are inexhaustible**

**....one of the most exasperating things about making a painting ... although one longs to use one's intellect as such, one finds one cannot do so in the way one normally does. What is in that way viable turns out to be beside the point. It seems to be less a question of successive thinking than an instantaneous response.**

You must remain open to what the medium wants?

**Yes and one will need all one's experience and flexibility to field it.**

Last year I made a series of sculptures in which I tried to avoid, for as long as possible, any explicit reference to a recognizable object. I called them the Substantia Innominata Series

(SI series) for obvious reasons.

<http://paul-march.com/section/403550-substantia-innominata-series.html>

Starting with a lump of clay I would try and model it into something I did not recognize. If it did become recognizable, I would either efface it or rotate the object so that it's new orientation neutralized recognition. Of course, the easiest way to make an unrecognizable object is to fashion the clay into an unreadable amorphous lump - but I do not think this makes for very interesting art.

Instead my aim was to create highly structured objects that would nevertheless escape categorization. This is really an impossible task – to create structure without recognition. I tried doing it by entering into a relationship with the clay and by leaving as much of the decision making as possible to the properties of the clay, its relationship to gravity and its reaction to my hands. I would carry on until I perceived the clay object to have an internal coherence, a life of its own, a personality. Then I would stop.

The decision to stop had a qualitative difference from the rest of the decision making process. Often I found that I would continue to work too long and the object would suddenly lose its coherence. I found it was important to stop as soon as this moment of coherence arrived but I never noticed any desire by the clay or by my hands to stop. They seemed to want to go on forever. I had to impose a decision on them: a decision that always felt like it came from outside the system.

When I look at these objects now they seem strange. I do not feel a particular connection to them. Although they still appear coherent and comfortable in their skin, my feelings towards them are more like those towards objects that I have found rather than made.

And in a sense I did find these objects. In any case, there certainly seems very little personal agency in them. The size of them, their organic forms and the nature of their curves are determined by the anatomy and musculature of my hands rather than by me (I am not responsible for the shape of my hands). It is as though my hands have agency separate from me.

Let us contrast the SI Series with my subsequent work during which I have been more active in terms of agency - asking the clay to take on the forms and thereby the experiences I wish to convey. But in my recent work, although I have a feeling for the form, I have only a fuzzy idea of its final appearance which I bring out in collaboration with the clay. When I look at these forms, I do recognize myself in them. They are surprising to me but not alien.

<http://paul-march.com/section/423668-Latest-work.html>

So what is going on here?

First of all, let me describe what I think happens when I look at something.

I spend a lot of my days looking at things, analyzing objects and analyzing the relationship between objects and me. When I do this, I am not taking looking for granted. That is, I have quite a different attitude from when I am cycling or buying stuff in a shop for example.

One day I was looking at a foxglove. Or let us say a foxglove found itself in my gaze. Foxgloves have a resonance for me from childhood (a Proustian involuntary memory). As I held the foxglove's gaze, I felt that there was something in the foxglove's look that belonged to me.

In Nicholas Humphrey's book "Soul Dust" he suggests that we project sensations onto objects. At one point he asks the question...

**"Does that mean that the phenomenal properties of sensation now pertain to an entity that is *not you*? The answer I suggest is both yes and no. That is, what is happening is that you still feel yourself involved, even *bodily* involved, in the sensation, only the limits of your body have mysteriously been spread out to coincide with the distal world."**

He compares the sensation of the redness of a tomato with the findings of Armel and Ramachandran's (2003) "rubber arm experiment" in which a participant's arm is hidden **under** a table and is then brushed in synchronization with the brushing of a visible rubber hand **on** the table. The participant locates the sensation in the rubber arm rather than his/her own one. Humphrey describes how a similar displacement might occur between the brushing of light on the surface of a red tomato and the simultaneous brushing of the reflection of the red "tomato" light on the retina. As he describes it "the tomato has *become part of the skin of your eye*" (page 141, lines 21-22)

Merleau-Ponty has a lot to say on the subject. In "L'Oeil et L'Esprit" (Eye and Mind, 1964) he quotes the painter André Marchand

**"In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt the trees were looking at me.... I think the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it."**

And in the "Phenomenology of Perception" Merleau-Ponty (1965) argues that being conscious of the self looking at an object is an essential component of being conscious of an object, or rather the two are synonymous.

However, he also argues that that the perception of an object expunges consciousness of self thus exposing a contradiction – a failure of perceptual consciousness.

In order to square the above circle and so perceive an object, he argues that the experience of time must become elastic. We "take possession of time" in order to place the object in the past. If we do not, the object "occupies and expunges" our consciousness of self.

Raymond Tallis (2011) in his book "Aping Mankind" argues something similar. Tallis emphasizes that perception is always about something and that we humans do not just

perceive; we perceive with intention. He says, “we are not merely organisms we are *embodied subjects*”. When confronting the object, the person is aware of him/herself as other than the object. The act of perception meshes us with the world and distances us at the same time. It creates a human world that is both linked and apart from the physical world: a cultural world that humans have been creating together for millennia

According to Tallis, when we perceive an object, we are aware that it transcends our perception of it and that our perception of the object and the object itself are not the same.

To summarize, I suggest three stages in the awareness of perception.

- 1) I experience the object - but I am not aware of the experience (a bit like the state of play just before what Wittgenstein describes as “noticing an aspect” \*
- 2) I experience myself experiencing an object
- 3) I experience myself implicated in the creation of a sensation and this sensation may be located in an object not myself.

Now I would like to come at this from a different direction

As we saw in my introduction, the photograph of Substantia Innominata X (SI X) is not equivalent to SI X but, in the absence of the sculpture itself, it appears to take on the mantle of SI X. Likewise, a portrait takes on something of the personhood of the subject. When I look at a self-portrait of Rembrandt I feel the personhood of Rembrandt. If you doubt the transfer of personhood into its image, try tearing up photos of your children or your lover and see how you feel as you do it.

Let us explore the concept of distributed personhood a bit further. In his book “Art and Agency” Alfred Gell (1998) uses the example of Volt sorcery to explore the relationship between distributed minds and artefacts. For example, a person creates a voodoo doll in the likeness of someone he wishes to harm. He then damages or destroys the doll in the belief that the same fate will befall the represented person. Gell points out that this magic is seen as irrational only if we seek a physical explanation for how harm to a doll can cause harm to a person. In Gell’s view, the doll does not have physical agency but does have intentional agency. As he says, “*intentions cause events to happen in the vicinity of agents*”. (page 101, line 8)

As an illustration he proposes two answers to the question “Why did the egg boil?”

- 1) Because the water reached 100 degrees
- 2) Because I wanted a boiled egg for my breakfast.

The first is an explanation that describes a physical cause, the second attributes cause to intention.

Interestingly volt sorcery is also sometimes performed on what Gell calls the “distributed personhood” of the victim - sloughed off remains from the body - the hair or nail clippings

of the target. Like the self-portrait of Rembrandt and the photos of your children or your lover something of the personhood of the victim inhabits the doll, hair or nail clippings

The intention of volt sorcery is to harm the victim. What are my intentions towards the viewer with regard to the SI series? I intend to confound, to confuse, to leave the viewer somewhat at a loss. To be unsure what he/she is looking at: man-made or found object? art or artefact? Stone? Bone? Concrete? Ceramic?

Gell suggests that when we look at an artwork we abduct the agency of the artist. That is, we try and suppose the nature of his/her intentions. We treat artworks like people. My intention was to make this act of abduction as difficult as possible: to hide , disguise or deny the personhood of the artist.

Gell suggests that a finished artwork is the static consequence of a dynamic interaction between the agency of the artist and that of the material. Each work in an artist's oeuvre represents a point where agency stops and takes on visible form. Thereafter, it takes on a new dynamic life as it reveals the results of the previous interactive experience to the viewer. It expresses both my intentions and intentions unintended by me. It becomes an agent in its own right with the capacity to dance with the minds of others.

The agency of objects is the central theme of the book by archaeologist, Lambros Malfouris "How Things Shape the Mind" (2013). He argues that it is a mistake to search for what an artefact can tell us about the internal cognitive structure of its maker. Instead we should view an artefact as an essential active partner in a cognitive process. As the maker formed it, it formed and informed the maker. What he says about archaeological artefacts is also relevant to contemporary art.

In terms of the art that the clay and I make, Malfouris' understanding suits me very well. I see the finished objects neither as representing anything, nor symbolic of anything, nor containing any intrinsic meaning. Rather, I see them as doing something – to me as I make them and to you as you view them. These objects have, what Malfouris calls enactive signification – they create sensational recursive ripples.

There is another episode to this story - a very important one. Unfortunately, I do not know yet how it goes. In this talk, I have described a Gibsonian (1979) world in which there is a direct but recursive relationship between the world, our perception of it and action. I have agency. Objects have agency. Objects do not speak to me they enact me. But here lies the rub, how does intentionality fit in? It doesn't seem to fit. Each time I made the decision to stop a Substantia Innominata sculpture it felt like I was breaking the systemic pattern of reciprocal causality. I know that feelings can often be misleading but, if we are to understand ourselves in our world, we should start by taking them very seriously.

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