

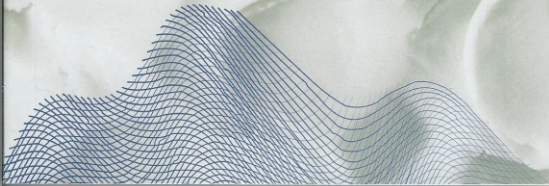


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CERAMICS
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WAYS OF CLAY

PERSPECTIVES TOWARD THE FUTURE

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WAYS OF CLAY

NURDIAN ICHSAN CURATOR

Ceramics is a tradition that stretches back to the beginning of civilization, and have now become part of human existence. The ceramics landscape covers pottery, design, art, and architecture. In general, ceramics refers to fired clay, and therefore it can appear in all categories of modern art—from decorative art, plastic arts, to design, craft, and fine art. Using clay and ceramics is the opposite of any attempts to discover a purity of medium in modern art. It's difficult for modern art to address the "untidiness" or "convolutions" of clay and ceramics. Both mediums are easily coopted into forms that are traditionally looked down upon by 'high art', such as hobby, functional, amateur, populist, and decorative forms. This is also the reason why ceramics is often placed under Crafts, where skills and materiality are its main values.

And yet, many non-craft artists and practitioners continue to use clay as their creative medium. So, we can see here how art, design, and craft occupy regions that are not fixed, with ever-shifting commitments, in terms of history or discourse. In this veins, clay and ceramics do not, and will never, have a fixed status within the context of modern and contemporary art. The questions inevitably repeat with almost every exhibition and in almost every literature: can ceramics be considered a discipline, or is it a series of disciplines that happen to use the same material. There is no singular clay history, but there are histories.

There have been many attempts to reconstruct, revise, and (re)position ceramics within the mainstream of Western art history. According to James Elkin, these attempts are, ultimately, artificial because ceramics play only a very small role in the main narrative of Western art history. These questions form the foundation for Ways of Clay, and is a way for us to transcend political discussions surrounding the position and status of ceramics in the greater art landscape and history. Ways of Clay embarks from the reality that clay and ceramics, as materials, remain interesting to many artists. What inspires these artists to use clay and ceramics? How are these materials relevant to the practice of contemporary art today? How can we understand these 'primitive' materials within the context of today's digital world? In what way can ceramic works enrich our understanding of reality? These are the main considerations informing this text. Ways of Clay places clay and ceramics as the determining factor in a

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process of creation and interpretation. Such a process involves specific material experiences. Material experience is different from an optical experience that has dominated Western culture. Western Modern Art viewpoints and concepts often scrutinize art practice through the perspective of an optical experience. If we follow this line of thought, then we can find that it comes from the concept of mimetic imitation that was the foundation of Western aesthetic development. It is apparent that the ambitions within artistic practice—painting and sculpture, especially—have been to achieve a purity in visual effects. Rawson even referred to it as 'sensuous castration', to explain how this optical experience has come to dominate Western cultures. Interestingly, the preeminence of vision/optical consideration is not so apparent in Eastern art practices, where other sensory experiences, such as touch or hearing, are equally important.

Ceramics is an artistic practice that is material in character. We do not only look at them; we touch and handle ceramic objects perhaps every day. In many cases, the sensuality of ceramics rely on touch and tactility. Ceramics' tactility stems from our deep relationship with ceramic objects and with past tactile experiences. Whether a particular object is intended to be handled (touched) or otherwise, touch remains inherent to it. Kemske put it: "...because of the intimacy that we share with the material, both as makers and as consumers, ceramics as a whole has never ceased to find value in the tactilely sensuous." Meanwhile, Elkins described it thusly: "What matters here is often the idea or the thought of touching."

To look at this experience of materiality in the practice of ceramic art, the following text is divided into two main ideas: clay impulses and ceramic clues. These two ideas are interconnected, and in their own way can influence how artists create their works. Similarly, they have a unique way of influencing the audience's appreciation of a particular artwork.

Clay impulses : PRIMAL FORMLESSNESS TRANSIENT

Clay is a 'primitive' material that has been part of human life since the pre-modern era. Clay is a "tangible" material that invites our physical involvement, through our hands and fingers, even the body. Clay is sensual, warm, soft, and slippery when it is still moist. Thus, clay is an experiential material, or a material that can only be understood through direct experience and observation.

Its abundance and its easy handling are some reasons why clay is used throughout civilizations. Clay is the soil and the earth, something that predates humankind. As such, humans and clay share an existential connection, intertwined with their origins, their dwelling places, and their terminus. It is possible that the most fundamental human instinct, to create/shape something, finds its representation or fulfillment in clay. Their interactions with clay place the artists in a unique position, almost inside a metaphor of the creation of life itself. Specifically, clay as a medium does not only offer itself as a way to imitate nature, but in itself is connected to the creation myth that exists in almost all of the world's religions and cultures. "Anyone who has tried to fashion a clay figure feels that visceral pull between material and form, and, entering the realm of the earth mother, senses that one is modeling with the gods."

A combination between a desire to shape something, a certain freedom, and the rawness of clay has, in a sense, placed the artist as a creator. For many thousands of years, clay has been used by many cultures and civilizations to describe the self. Describing oneself is one of the most primal impulses in humankind, related to an ontological inquiry about what it meant to be human. This impulse is a way for people to understand reality and the self. It is therefore not surprising that clay has become a choice for artists to represent a "return to earth", especially with the emergence of land art in the 1970s. The connection between clay and the origins of humankind is not a visual (optical) figurative issue. More than that, clay represents the flesh or body itself. "Clay was another way of dealing with the flesh". Many performance art works use clay to approach this concept. One of these pioneering artists was Ana Mendieta, through *Siluetas*, which she conceived in the 1970s-80s. She called it a combination of land art, body art and performance art, wrapped up in a presentation of earth-body sculptures. Elsewhere, the connection between clay and the body is explored through clay's ability to record

something. Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone in 1978 imprinted his own torso onto plastic clay. *Breath 5* shows a mouth-like cavity connected to the shape of the artist's torso and legs. Similarly, we can look at *My Hands are My Heart* from Gabriel Orozco (1991), where he imprinted both hands to create the form of a heart. Even further, the connection between clay and body transcends fingers and hands. Andrew Lord is known for the vessels he has made not just with his hands (handbuilding), but also with his teeth (biting).

I thought that the impulse to use clay as a creative material stems from an instinct and desire to be connected with something rooted, free, original, and without pretense. Something primeval. Other than Henri Matisse, Post-Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin was an early modern artist who showed interest in clay. In 1886, he collaborated with Ernest Chaplet to create a series of ceramic works. He saw his ceramic works and ceramic sculptures as symbols of the primeval and the 'grotesque'; he saw ceramics as a medium through which he could freely create aspects that are more primitive and exotic than what he could achieve with his paintings. In those days, there weren't many painters who ventured into plastic art. Impressionist artists like Monet, Pissarro, Cézanne, and Van Gogh were more preoccupied with light and the study of it. Only Fauvism and Cubism showed interest in tangible material. Up to the 1950s, many artists made ceramic works following a similar pattern—working in cooperation with ceramists to create their works. There were even titles like "painters ceramic" for works by Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, Joan Miro, and Raoul Dufy. "The most important experience Chagall had thanks to ceramics was not in the first place the discovery of the third dimension in the art but the primitive experience of the creative act." There's a primitive creative energy found within clay.

Clay could easily be formed even with modest tools and skills, and thus it is accessible to anyone. Clay is democratic, populist, and will never be elitist. This is the reason why CoBRA—an avant-garde collective founded in 1948—chose ceramics as one of their creative media. The experimental spirit and a rejection of modern art's elitism had inspired them to explore various possibilities of material and media without fear of technical limitations. Other than the draw of clay's potential for "direct expression", CoBRA artists also used ceramics to reject the primacy of medium in the practice of fine art.

Ceramic works by fine artists were rarely, if ever, considered as serious works, as exemplified in a comment made by art critic Hilton Kramer on sculptor Isamu Noguchi's ceramic works. For Kramer, these works are side activities, something done 'just for fun', something that indicated "high unseriousness". He described those works as "the gingerbread cookies of playful and somewhat inebriated baker". Seen this way, we could see how clay and ceramics were often considered as deviations or whimsy. On the other hand, the craftworld saw fine artists as not committed enough to the medium, and labeled these artists as outsiders or visitors.

One of the fine artists whom the craftworld does seem to recognize as a ceramist was Lucio Fontana, known for his Spatialism. In 1935, Lucio Fontana began working with ceramist Tullio Mazotti in Albissola, Italy, despite having created ceramic works 9 years previously in Argentina. If most other fine artists were grudgingly seen as 'visitors', Fontana was accepted as a 'true ceramist'. Fontana used the metaphor "earthquaked but motionless" to describe clay's malleable characteristic as it metamorphosed into ceramics. "I did not know what I wanted to do until I sank my hands into clay". This statement explained how pre-images, or an intention to imitate, did not exist in Fontana's creative approach. Such an approach is possible due to clay's "rawness", which according to Rita Widagdo, "does not show any natural aesthetics as found in wood or stone.

What finally appears in a ceramic object that can be considered as an aesthetic element or a spiritual value comes entirely from the creator's imagination, or in other words, the material itself (earth) does not gift anything to the ceramist". When handling clay, there's a feeling that we're repeating a fundamental process that changes something formless into form. Coaxing what was non-existent into existence. This view informed Herbert Read's opinion of pottery as pure art, because pottery is unfettered by the intention to imitate something, that it is fundamentally the most abstract form of plastic art. It would later inform the studio art movement as advocated by Bernard Leach in the 1920s. Clay's raw character, and its non-mimetic tendencies, found relevancy in non-functional works created along the principles of abstract sculpture. Ceramic works within this "abstract" prescription describe a condition between the freedom to create form and the uncertainty of an amorphous character. Framed against such perspective, these works can be placed along a disorder-order spectrum.

The creative impulse is reflected in the level of control wrought on clay. The spectrum extends out from clay's physical characteristics—chunks, fractures, cracks. Works by Peter Voukouscan be taken as examples. Clay's raw and direct characteristics have become the basis for him to create works using abstract expressionist approaches. The process did not begin with a theme or image, but rather it was a product of a direct reaction toward form. Clay's ability to record action in a direct manner allows Voukous's works to feel more like an "action" compared to a Jackson Pollock painting. On the other hand, works that exercise a high level of control and manipulation of materials are works that appear geometric, measured, clean, and distant (cold).

According to Adamson, such an approach can be attributed to the sculptor Constantin Brancusi. "Brancusi seems to be everywhere in the crafts. He provides a stable and reassuring point of reference for functionless, formal, abstract sculpture in organic materials—a description that covers the majority of works sold in the upper stratum of the crafts marketplace." "Brancusi is not only a source of artistic power, but also a convenient rhetorical device."

Artists working with clay are sensitive to the impermanence (transience) of their material, because clay can be changed quickly and directly, purged and repeated. Toni Craggsaid: "I move, it moves". Noguchi saw that clay's malleability/transformational ability might make it difficult for an artist to stop working—here lies the danger. But an awareness of this characteristic enables artists to use, or even lampoon, this impermanence in their works. We can see it in works that use unfired clay, in video- or performance art works, that demonstrate the changes occurring with clay as material. We can see this in Charles Simonds's site specific *Dwelling* (1970), miniature brick buildings placed in various public spaces. These lilliputian buildings were left to "disappear" on its own.

These days, durational works that highlight the material's transience can often be found in ceramic art practices, such as works that show "the changes in clay that dissolve or disintegrate due to water or weather". Other works might show artists breaking/smashing ceramic objects, or gluing together broken pieces of ceramics. The cycle, *uniform-->form-->deform-->reform*, that is not always linear, seems to be something unique to ceramic art practice. Today, we can see many works that have deliberate deformed appearances. They describe the changeable and uncertain nature of forms, and also of impermanence.

Ceramic clues : DEMOTIC, DOMESTIC, AND INDUSTRIAL

Ceramic clues point to ceramics as objects that have become part of our daily life. If clay impulses are based on one's physical interactions with clay and one's personal understanding of a creative process, then ceramic clues are founded upon a collective consciousness toward ceramics. In this way, a ceramic object becomes a physical object that has diverse relationships with people that are not just about how an object is used or consumed, but also about how or why an object is made or modified, including the meanings affixed to it.

A relationship between people and ceramics is not simple, because it involves a diverse array of ceramic objects, as explained by Veiteberg:

"We find ceramics in many different cultural contexts. Cheap, mass-produced souvenirs and tableware live side by side with venerated Japanese tea bowls, old Chinese urns and exclusive figurines hand-made in European porcelain factories with long-standing traditions, such as Sèvres and Nymphenburg. The choice of clay, firing method, object type and style are not neutral choices, because they are all imbued with different values."

The difficulty of "detaching" ceramics from the context of daily existence has led to the "banishment" of ceramics from modern art proper. On the other hand, within the context of contemporary art, ceramics is a way to connect art praxis to the wider public. Today, artists continue to use clay and ceramics as their creative medium. James Elkins stated, "Ceramics, I think, is in a better position, because it already has strong affinities with contemporary art." Within the modern art framework, the general public and the art public continue to draw away from each other, because of a delineation that reserves art experiences for the bourgeois and elite. Meanwhile, "reconciliation" is one of the main agendas of contemporary art practice. In this case, ceramics can become a mediator that connects art to the wider public, especially because ceramics is a familiar "language".

Our connection with ceramics can be described thus: demotic, domestic, and industrial. Demotic is connected to the populist and the everyday, to craftwork, the traditional and vernacular. Domestic refers to the household and all of its problems. Industrial represents the strong connection between ceramic objects and technological development as well as with modern society. When an artist decides on the kind of clay he or she uses, on the creative techniques, coloring, forms, and even ways of presentation, then the three aspects can emerge as part of a collective perceptual consciousness. Done either alone or with the help of craftspeople, either with ready-mades, or even video work, these aspects will continue to make themselves known.

If we look closely, this sort of consciousness began largely with Marcel Duchamp in 1917 with Fountain, which would later be considered as one of the most influential works of the 20th century. Fountain is a mass-produced porcelain urinal, presented upside down and with the signature "R. Mutt 1917". It is considered as the precursor of conceptual art and the beginning of the proliferation of ready-made approaches in art. Duchamp's urinal marked a radical shift in art practices by questioning the connection between concept, artist's intention, and skill in the creation of an artwork. There were not many who saw how this particular piece could be relevant to the discourses surrounding ceramic art development, other than to clarify and define the differences between craft and fine art approaches.

Fact remains that Duchamp's use of a mass-produced porcelain object in his work is interesting. The urinal is industrial, private, domestic, commonplace, but also taboo. Duchamp stated that he had chosen the urinal because it had the smallest chance of it being enjoyed, despite the fact that many people came to enjoy it aesthetically, even then. Perhaps Duchamp had consciously decided upon using a urinal because he thought it did not represent elite tastes, but that it actually represented the tastes of a wider public. The more he felt that it did not "fit" with the art elites, the more he felt that he was part of the greater public's taste of the aesthetic. Duchamp's Fountain "proved" that elite tastes were [often] the opposite of those of the general public's. These aspects contributed to Fountain's controversy and criticism.

Similarly, Pop Art proponent Roy Lichtenstein made tableware and portrait sculptures imbued with his unique characteristics—lines and dots reminiscent of low-price comic-book aesthetics. By showing the mechanical, domestic, and unmonumental side of his works, he was rejecting the "aloofness" of three-dimensional art. Lichtenstein's choice to use ceramics is the same as Warhol's choiceto use printmaking—appropriating mass production methods to serve the kind of aesthetic language spoken by an industrial society.

In actuality, the use of ceramics is founded upon the artist's desire to discover a way to connect art to the wider public. As stated by Koons about his ceramic sculptures: "Everyone grew up surrounded by this material. I use it to penetrate mass consciousness—to communicate to the people." Koons's works provoke the memory about domestic objects, forcing us to yield to the charms of these objects' kitschy intensity. Meanwhile, Cindy Sherman serves up domesticity, opulence, and aristocracy in her embodiment of

Madame de Pompadour, mistress to King Louis XV and patroness of art. Sherman has incorporated images of herself on soup bowls and dinner sets as it would've been designed in 1756 for the royal patron herself. Then there's Grayson Perry's innocent and decorative classically-formed ceramic dishes, which invoke old aristocratic tastes. On the other hand, there's James Turrell and his Lapsed Quaker Wareseries that feature simple 18th century Quakerstyle crockery. Turrell himself was raised in the Quaker faith, a religious movement that emerged in the 17th century. The domestic and demotic aspects in Sherman's, Perry's or Turrell's works can also be used to refer to a particular cultural or communal identity. In Ai Wei Wei's works, meanwhile, an industrial aspect is strongly highlighted in mass produced porcelain, though packaged in an interesting way to preserve or declare its Mainland Chinese identity. If, in the beginning, ceramics was mostly made with the intention to connect art to the wider public, now many works actually begin with an awareness of ceramic's connection to a particular community or culture.

From the above discussion, both clay and ceramics act as a way to connects an artist to his or herself, or an artist to reality and society. The use of clay and ceramics in art praxis is informed by their potential as mediators. Clay connects the artist to something primeval and existential; meanwhile ceramics connects art to daily life and the wider public. These connections are further embedded in our collective consciousness, i.e. an experiential consciousness to clay and ceramics. They influence the way we appreciate ceramic art. Ways of Clay is a way to look at ceramics and clay as an unavoidable element in our human existence.

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